

RASHTRAPATI BHAVAN LIBRARY



Reg. No. 399

Class. No. V(b)- 1

By the same Author

THE UNKNOWN
THE CIRCLE
THE EXPLORER
JACK STRAW
LADY FREDERICK
LANDED GENTRY
THE TENTH MAN
A MAN OF HONOUR
MRS. DOT
PENELOPE
SMITH
THE LAND OF PROMISE
CÆSAR'S WIFE
HOME AND BEAUTY
THE UNATTAINABLE
OUR BETTERS

LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD.

LOAVES AND FISHES

A COMEDY IN FOUR ACTS

BY

W. S. MAUGHAM



LONDON · WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD.

The performing Rights of this play are fully protected, and permission to perform it, whether by Amateurs or Professionals, must be obtained in advance from the author's Sole Agent, R. Golding Bright, 20, Green Street, Leicester Square, London, W.C. 2, from whom all particulars can be obtained.

-

This Play was produced at the Duke of York's Theatre, on February 24th, 1911, with the following cast :—

THE HON. & REV. CANON THEODORE SPRATTE

Robert Loraine

THE EARL SPRATTE

C. M. Lowne

THE REV. LIONEL SPRATTE

Basil Hallam

LORD WROXHAM

Athol Stewart

BERTRAM RAILING

Thomas Holding

PONSONBY

Duncan McRae

MRS. FITZGERALD

Ellis Jeffreys

LADY SOPHIA SPRATTE

Frances Ivor

WINIFRED SPRATTE

Marie Hemingway

GWENDOLEN DURANT

Viva Birkett

MRS. RAILING

Florence Haydon

LOUISE RAILING

Mary Barton

-

PERSONS OF THE PLAY

THE HON. & REV. CANON THEODORE SPRATTE.

(Vicar of St. Gregory's, South Kensington).

THE EARL SPRATTE.

THE REV. LIONEL SPRATTE.

LORD WROXHAM.

BERTRAM RAILING.

PONSONBY.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

LADY SOPHIA SPRATTE.

WINIFRED SPRATTE.

GWENDOLEN DURANT.

MRS. RAILING.

LOUISE RAILING.

The scene throughout is the drawing room at
St. Gregory's Vicarage.

LOAVES AND FISHES.

ACT I.

SCENE: *The drawing-room at St. Gregory's Vicarage. It is large and handsome. The furniture follows the fashion of the moment. It is luxurious, elegant, and costly. Prominently placed is a full-length portrait of the first Earl Spratte, Lord High Chancellor of England. The drawing-room opens into another room at the back, and is separated from it by an archway. There are doors right and left.*

LADY SOPHIA is lying on a sofa, reading the "*Fortnightly Review*." She is a handsome, well-groomed woman of a determined appearance. She cultivates a light irony and it pleases her sometimes to be sarcastic. She is fifty years of age.

Tea things are set out on a table. PONSONBY brings in a teapot and a kettle. He lights the spirit lamp. PONSONBY is a butler of the most impressive appearance. He joins the self-confidence of a member of Parliament to the sombre dignity of a mate at a very expensive funeral.

LADY SOPHIA *continues to read* and PONSONBY, *having done his duty, retires. In a moment LIONEL comes in. This is Canon Spratte's son and curate, and Lady Sophia's nephew. He is a tall young man, languid and fair-haired: he is dressed as little like a clergyman as is decent.*

LIONEL *looks at Lady Sophia and at the tea kettle.*

LIONEL.

Is tea ready, Aunt Sophia?

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Putting down the magazine.*] It looks suspiciously like it, Lionel.

During the next speeches she makes the tea.

LIONEL.

What a regiment of cups. Are you expecting a crowd?

LADY SOPHIA.

I'm not. I darsay Ponsonby is.

LIONEL.

I sometimes wonder if Ponsonby invites the people who come here. He's generally the only person who knows they're expected.

LADY SOPHIA.

If he does, I can only say that his circle of acquaintance is rather mixed.

LIONEL.

Is father in?

LADY SOPHIA.

I shouldn't think so. He's probably discussing the simple life at the tea-table of a dowager marchioness.

LIONEL.

I say, I am glad to get my tea.

LADY SOPHIA.

Have you been busy to-day?

LIONEL.

No, not very.

LADY SOPHIA.

You must be glad you're paid by time and not by the piece.

LIONEL.

I say, I think the governor ought to give me a rise. He couldn't get anyone else for the money.

LADY SOPHIA.

Your father has always underpaid his curates on principle. He thinks it keeps them out of temptation.

LIONEL.

The governor doesn't seem to realise that laying up treasure in heaven won't help you to pay a tailor's bill.

LADY SOPHIA.

But you don't look as if you were in any want of clothes.

LIONEL.

I'm not. That's why I've got a tailor's bill.

CANON SPRATTE comes in. *He is a tall, very handsome man, with a fine head of curly white hair ; clean-shaven, dignified, and very bland. He knows he is a good-looking and a successful man. His clothes fit admirably.*

CANON SPRATTE.

Is tea ready ?

LADY SOPHIA.

You are not going to honour us with your company, Theodore ?

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Smiling.*] If you have no objection, my dear. Has Mrs. Fitzgerald arrived ?

LADY SOPHIA.

Mrs. Fitzgerald ?

CANON SPRATTE.

You've not forgotten that she comes to-day ?

LADY SOPHIA.

Oh, dear, oh, dear. . . . Do ring, Lionel, will you ?

CANON SPRATTE.

[*With a touch of asperity.*] Really, Sophia.

LIONEL.

[*Touching the bell.*] Is she coming to stay?

CANON SPRATTE.

She's having her house done up and it wasn't quite ready, so Sophia very kindly asked her to stay here till she was able to move in.

LADY SOPHIA.

How lucky you reminded me, Theodore.

CANON SPRATTE.

I'm used to reminding you, my dear Sophia.

LADY SOPHIA.

You bear your cross with such gallantry, Theodore, it would be a pity to deprive you of it. [*Enter PONSONBY.*] Ponsonby, Mrs. Fitzgerald is coming here to-day. Will you see that rooms are got ready.

PONSONBY.

I've already seen to it, my lady.

LADY SOPHIA.

Oh, you knew she was coming?

PONSONBY.

I saw it in this morning's *Post*, my lady.

Exit PONSONBY.

CANON SPRATTE.

How clever the newspapers are. They know everything.

LIONEL.

I've not seen Mrs. Fitzgerald since her husband died.

CANON SPRATTE.

She must be out of mourning by now.

LADY SOPHIA.

I imagine that depends on how mourning became her.

LIONEL.

Is she well off?

CANON SPRATTE.

I understand that her husband left her everything he had. It was the least he could do considering how much longer he lived than anyone expected.

LADY SOPHIA.

It's a way rich old husbands have.

LIONEL.

Did she marry him for his money?

CANON SPRATTE.

Certainly not. Mrs. Fitzgerald's a charming woman and incapable of doing anything of the sort. She married him *with* his money.

LIONEL.

Have you had a busy day, governor?

CANON SPRATTE.

I always have a busy day, my boy. By the way, you won't forget those two funerals to-morrow, will you?

LIONEL.

Oh no, rather not.

LADY SOPHIA.

Do I know the corpses?

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Rather shocked.*] My dear, you have a way of expressing yourself . . . [*With a twinkle.*] As a matter of fact I believe one of them is our own fishmonger.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*With deep satisfaction.*] Ah, I thought the fish had been very inferior the last few days.

PONSONBY enters to announce MRS. FITZGERALD. *She is a tall, handsome woman of thirty-five. She is beautifully dressed. There is a suggestion of half-mourning about her costume, but, as LADY SOPHIA suspected would be the case, it appears to be worn for æsthetic reasons rather than as a mark of lamentation. MRS. FITZGERALD gives the impression of a woman keenly alive to her own advantages, self-confident and full of humour.*

PONSONBY.

Mrs. Fitzgerald.

Exit PONSONBY. *She goes up to LADY SOPHIA and kisses her.*

MRS. FITZGERALD.

At last! I've had such a tiring journey.

LADY SOPHIA.

I *am* glad to see you, Mary.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

My dear Sophia, it's so kind of you to let me come and stay here for a couple of days.

CANON SPRATTE.

I hope the slowness of the British workmen will force you to give us at least a week of your charming society.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*Shaking hands with him.*] If I thought that I'd send my washing.

CANON SPRATTE.

I implore you to risk it.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*As he holds her hand.*] It always makes me feel ten years younger to see you, dear Canon.

CANON SPRATTE.

Ah, don't say that or I shall feel like a father to you. Look how white my hair is growing.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*With a smile.*] It suits you.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Smiling.*] My dear Mary, don't start flirting with him the moment you come.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*Gaily.*] I can't help it. The Canon calls forth all my baser instincts.

CANON SPRATTE.

Ah, you only say that because you think my advancing years make me quite safe.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Oh, I don't know about that. Handsome men are never so dangerous as when their hair is just turning grey.

CANON SPRATTE.

Do you remember Lionel? He's my curate at St. Gregory's, you know.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I'm sure you've grown since I saw you last.

LIONEL.

Only in grace then.

CANON SPRATTE.

I must tell you that Lionel is seriously thinking of getting married.

LIONEL.

[*Turning scarlet.*] I, father? What *are* you talking about?

CANON SPRATTE.

A little bird has whispered to me that Master Cupid has been busy with you, Lionel. Come, come, you must have no secrets from your old father.

LIONEL.

I really don't know what you mean.

CANON SPRATTE.

Are you going to deny that you have cast a—a favourable eye upon Miss Gwendolen Durant.

LADY SOPHIA.

Gwendolen?

LIONEL.

[*Embarrassed.*] I like her very much, father, but I've not said anything to her. I have no reason to believe that she cares for me.

CANON SPRATTE.

Good heavens, that's not the way to make love, my boy. When I was your age I never asked if there were reasons why a young woman should care for me. It's a foolish lover who prates of his own unworthiness.

LIONEL.

But I've not altogether made up my mind.

CANON SPRATTE.

Well, then, make it up, my boy, for it's high time you were married. Don't forget that an old and honoured name depends on you. Your Uncle is unlikely to marry now. Your duty is to provide a male child to inherit the title, and I'm assured the Durants run to boys.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*Amused.*] My dear Canon, you think of everything.

LIONEL.

[*Taking out his watch.*] I must be getting along. I've got several things to do.

CANON SPRATTE.

Remember what I've told you, Lionel. Faint heart never won fair lady.

LIONEL.

You needn't pull my leg, father.

Exit LIONEL.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You've driven the poor boy away.

CANON SPRATTE.

I'm not altogether satisfied with Lionel. He's so phlegmatic. He's not half the man his father is.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*Smiling.*] Tell me more about Miss Durant. She's not the brewer's daughter, is she?

CANON SPRATT.

[*Rather apologetically.*] We live in a different world from that of my boyhood. Everyone has a finger in some commercial pie nowadays.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Then she *is* the brewer's daughter?

CANON SPRATTE.

I don't deny it for a moment.

LADY SOPHIA.

I shouldn't have thought it was a match entirely after your own heart, Theodore.

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear, I don't want you to think me cynical, but there are very nice girls *and* very nice girls. And the very nice girls with sixty or seventy thousand pounds of their own do not grow on every gooseberry bush.

Enter PONSONBY.

PONSONBY.

[*To* LADY SOPHIA.] You're wanted on the telephone, my lady.

LADY SOPHIA.

Oh, very well.

She gets up and goes out. Exit PONSONBY.

CANON SPRATTE.

You'll have an opportunity of seeing for yourself

what you think of the young lady. I've asked Winnie to bring her in to tea.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Oh, do talk to me about Winnie.

CANON SPRATTE.

I'd much sooner talk to you about you.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

My dear friend, we've known one another much too long.

CANON SPRATTE.

What *has* that got to do with it?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You want to flatter me, and for flattery to be pleasing one must be convinced at least for a moment that it's sincere.

CANON SPRATTE.

I never flatter and I'm always sincere.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I've never concealed from you my belief that you're the most desperate humbug I've ever known.

CANON SPRATTE.

You put me at my ease at once.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Still, if you really must, you may make it.

CANON SPRATTE.

What?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

The compliment that's on the tip of your tongue.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Promptly.*] I think you grow handsomer every day.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You have a way of coming straight to the point that's very comforting to a widow lady who's not quite so young as she was.

CANON SPRATTE.

With such a clever woman as you it would only be waste of time to beat about the bush.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*Throwing up her hands.*] Oh, do take care or you'll overdo it.

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear lady, I'm only just getting into my stride.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Then how fortunate that Sophia is just coming back.

LADY SOPHIA *enters the room as Mrs. FITZGERALD says the words.*

LADY SOPHIA.

Winnie has just telephoned to say she's bringing Mr. Railing back to tea.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Who is Mr. Railing?

LADY SOPHIA.

Oh, he's Theodore's latest discovery.

CANON SPRATTE.

He's a mighty clever young man, and I think he'll be very useful to me.

LADY SOPHIA.

Your actions are always governed by such unselfish motives, Theodore.

CANON SPRATTE.

God helps those who help themselves, Sophia.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

In that case the Almighty must be kept uncommonly busy.

CANON SPRATTE.

Mr. Railing is by way of being a Christian Socialist. He fought a seat for the labour party at the last election, but he didn't get in. I think he has a future, and I feel it my duty to give him some encouragement. Nowadays when Socialism is rapidly becoming a power in the land, when it is spreading branches into every stratum of society, it behoves us to rally it to the church.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*In tones of mild remonstrance.*] Theodore, we're quite alone.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Ignoring the interruption.*] I pride myself above all things on being abreast of the times. Every movement that savours of advance will find in me an enthusiastic supporter. My father, the late Lord Chancellor of England [*with a wave of his arm towards the portrait*] was one of the first to perceive the coming strength of the people. And I am proud to know that my family has ever identified itself with the future. Advance has always been our watchword. Advance and progress.

During this speech LORD SPRATTE has come in and listened silently. He is a tall, stout, and smart man of fifty odd. He is very well dressed in a rather horsey way.

LORD SPRATTE.

You speak as if we'd come over with the Conquest, Theodore.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*With a magnificent flourish.*] Behold the head of the family, Thomas, Second Earl Spratte of Beachcombe, Viscount Rallington and Baron Spratte in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

LORD SPRATTE.

[*Shaking hands with* MRS. FITZGERALD.] Shut it, Theodore.

CANON SPRATTE.

And pray, have you never looked up the name of Spratte in Burke or Debrett?

LORD SPRATTE.

Frequently. I find the peerage excellent readin' to fall back on when there's nothin' in the sportin' papers. It's my favourite work of fiction. But it's no bloomin' good, Theodore. A man with the name of Spratte didn't have ancestors at the Battle of Hastings.

CANON SPRATTE.

My father, the greatest lawyer of his age, implicitly believed in the family tree.

LORD SPRATTE.

He must have been a pretty innocent old buffer to do that. I never met anyone else who would. And upon my word, I don't know why a man called Spratte should have ancestors called Montmorency.

CANON SPRATTE.

I should have thought that even in your brief stay at Oxford, you learnt enough natural history to know that every man must have a father.

LORD SPRATTE.

Theodore, if a man called Spratte had a father

called Montmorency the less said about it the better. I may be particular, but it don't sound moral to me.

CANON SPRATTE.

Your facetiousness is misplaced, Thomas, and the taste of it is doubtful. The connection at which you are pleased to sneer is perfectly clear and perfectly honourable. In 1631 Aubrey de Montmorency married . . .

LADY SOPHIA.

Oh, Theodore, Theodore, not again.

PONSONBY *brings in the "Evening Standard"*
and hands it to the CANON.

PONSONBY.

The evening paper, Sir.

CANON SPRATTE.

Ah, thank you.

LADY SOPHIA.

Oh, Theodore, I've got some news that'll simply make you chortle. The Bishop of Colchester died this morning.

CANON SPRATTE.

Thomas, pray express yourself with more seemliness. [*Looking at the paper.*] Tut, tut, tut. Very sad. But after all he's been out of health for a long time. It's a happy release.

LADY SOPHIA.

I met him once. I thought him a very brilliant man.

CANON SPRATTE.

The Bishop of Colchester? My dear Sophia. Well, of course, I don't want to say anything against him now he's dead, poor man; but between ourselves, if the truth must be told, he was nothing more than a doddering old imbecile. And a man of no family.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I wonder who'll succeed him.

LORD SPRATTE.

You'd look rather a toff in leggin's, Theodore. [To LADY SOPHIA.] Wouldn't he?

LADY SOPHIA.

My dear Tommy, I've not seen his legs for forty years.

CANON SPRATTE.

It's really quite providential that the poor old man should die on the very day that I'm going to meet Lady Patricia Pears at dinner.

LORD SPRATTE.

Who on earth is she?

CANON SPRATTE.

Good heavens, why don't you study your peerage? She's the aunt by marriage of the second wife of the

Prime Minister's youngest son. And all the ecclesiastical patronage is in her hands.

LORD SPRATTE.

I hope you will accept no bishopric until you've made quite sure that the golf-links are all right.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Ironically.*] I'll tell the Prime Minister that an eighteen-hole course is a *sine qua non* of my elevation to the episcopacy.

A ring is heard at the front door.

LADY SOPHIA.

I daresay that's Winnie. She ought to be here by now.

LORD SPRATTE.

Where has she been?

CANON SPRATTE.

She went to a temperance meeting to hear our friend Mr. Railing speak.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

That sounds exhilarating.

LORD SPRATTE.

I say, what's the matter with Winnie? She lent me a book the other day called *The Future of Socialism*. It looked devilish instructive.

LADY SOPHIA.

Did you read it?

LORD SPRATTE.

I avoid instruction.

CANON SPRATTE.

That is painfully obvious from your conversation.

WINNIE comes in with GWENDOLEN DURANT and HERBERT RAILING. WINNIE is a pretty, fair girl of one and twenty, very fashionably gowned. She is pink and white and virginal. GWENDOLEN is a little taller, more languid, but something of the same type; she is a year or two older. HERBERT RAILING is in everything a marked contrast to the two girls. He has the obvious, flaunting good looks which attract women. He is dark, with fine eyes, young and of a romantic appearance. He wears his very fine hair very much too long. His blue serge suit hangs about him comfortably, and though it is obviously ready-made, he looks more like a Greek god than any modern young man should dream of looking. His tie is carelessly tied. He is not at all bashful at finding himself among strangers, but is apt to look upon them with a certain superciliousness.

WINNIE.

We're simply dying for tea. Oh, Mrs. Fitzgerald.

There are general greetings. WINNIE kisses
MRS. FITZGERALD and her uncle, LORD

SPRATTE. GWENDOLEN *shakes hands with* LADY SOPHIA.

GWENDOLEN.

I can only stay a moment. It's so late.

WINNIE.

[*To RAILING.*] D'you know my uncle?

LORD SPRATTE.

[*Shaking hands with RAILING.*] How d'you do?

CANON SPRATTE.

I'm delighted to see you, Mr. Railing. So sorry I couldn't come to your meeting. I had to lunch with Lady de Capit to meet the Princess of Wartburg-Hochstein. A clergyman's time is really never his own.

LORD SPRATTE.

People so often forget that even Princesses have spiritual difficulties.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*To MRS. FITZGERALD.*] You must let me introduce Mr. Railing to you.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

How d'you do.

CANON SPRATTE.

Mr. Railing is the author of that much-discussed book, *The Future of Socialism*.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I'm afraid it sounds as if it were too deep for me.

RAILING.

The Duchess of St. Ermyns told me she found it as exciting as a novel.

CANON SPRATTE.

And was your meeting a success?

WINNIE.

[*Eagerly.*] You should have seen the audience, daddy. While Mr. Railing spoke you could have heard a pin drop, and afterwards there was such a storm of applause, I thought the roof was coming down.

RAILING.

They were all very kind and very appreciative.

CANON SPRATTE.

It's wonderful how people are carried away by eloquence. You must come and hear me preach.

RAILING.

I should like to very much.

CANON SPRATTE.

Advance and progress have ever been my watch-words. My family has always been in the vanguard when there has been any movement for the advantage of the working classes.

LORD SPRATTE.

From the days of the Montmorencys down to our father, the late Lord Chancellor of England.

CANON SPRATTE.

As my brother appositely reminds me, my ancestor, Aubrey de Montmorency, was killed while fighting for the freedom of the people in the year 1642. And his second son, Roger de Montmorency, from whom we are directly descended. . . . [LADY SOPHIA *coughs significantly, but the CANON proceeds firmly*] . . . was beheaded by James II. for resisting the tyranny of that popish and despotic sovereign.

LADY SPRATTE.

Gwendolen is waiting for a semi-colon to make her escape, Theodore.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Taking GWENDOLEN'S hand*]. Must we lose you already? I've not had a chance of saying a word to you.

GWENDOLEN.

Father is speaking at the Licensed Victuallers' to-night, and he wants me to hear his speech.

CANON SPRATTE.

It's charming of you to have given us at least a glimpse of you.

GWENDOLEN.

You always say such nice things, Canon.

CANON SPRATTE.

Only to nice people.

GWENDOLEN.

[To RAILING]. Good-bye. I enjoyed your lecture so much.

RAILING.

I hope it was convincing.

GWENDOLEN.

Oh, it didn't convince me because I make my living out of alcohol. But father says the moderate drinker pays much better than the habitual drunkard.

RAILING.

It's the moderate drinker we want to convert. The habitual drunkard we can deal with by act of parliament.

GWENDOLEN.

I wonder you didn't insist on coming here in an omnibus instead of father's new limousine. Good-bye.

RAILING.

[As she goes out]. I see that we've just lost one of our most ardent champions in the cause of temperance.

CANON SPRATTE.

Ah, yes. The Bishop of Colchester. I knew him well. Charming fellow.

RAILING.

He'll be a great loss.

CANON SPRATTE.

Oh, a great loss. I was deeply distressed when I heard of the sad event.

LORD SPRATTE.

I noticed that you kept your emotion well under control, Theodore.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Ignoring the interruption.*] I was just telling Sophia what a brilliant man he was.

RAILING.

There's a rumour that you are going to succeed him, Canon Spratte.

CANON SPRATTE.

I? It would require a great deal to tear me away from St. Gregory's. Where did you hear that?

RAILING.

Two or three people have mentioned it to me.

CANON SPRATTE.

Really. Really. Fancy anyone thinking of it.

RAILING.

I don't know what they would do here without you.

CANON SPRATTE.

Of course, no man is indispensable in this world.

LORD SPRATTE.

Theodore, you're too modest.

CANON SPRATTE.

And I don't know that I consider myself fit to take so large and so important a see as that of Colchester.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*Getting up.*] I think I'd like to go to my room. I'm rather tired.

CANON SPRATTE.

Forty winks, dear lady? You've had a long journey, haven't you? And yet you look as fresh as paint.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*With a smile, rubbing her cheek.*] It doesn't rub off.

LADY SOPHIA.

I will show you the way, shall I?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

D'you mind? [*Shaking hands with RAILING.*] Good-bye. I shall make a point of reading your book.

RAILING.

That's very kind of you.

[*With a nod at LORD SPRATTE she goes out, accompanied by LADY SOPHIA. The CANON catches RAILING'S glance at the Lord Chancellor's portrait.*]

CANON SPRATTE.

Ah, I see that you are admiring Millais' portrait of my father. Fine old fellow, wasn't he? Come and let me show you Sargeant's portrait of myself. It's in here.

RAILING.

I should like to see it very much.

[They go into the inner room, but remain in sight. The CANON is seen gesticulating as he points out the merits of the picture. LORD SPRATTE and WINNIE are left by themselves.]

WINNIE.

What d'you think of Mr. Railing?

LORD SPRATTE.

He smells of the only form of spirit which I've never acquired a taste for.

WINNIE.

What on earth d'you mean?

LORD SPRATTE.

Public spirit.

WINNIE.

[With an impatient shrug of the shoulders.] I wanted your serious opinion.

LORD SPRATTE.

He's the sort of chap that has statistics scribbled

all over his shirt-cuffs. And I shouldn't be surprised if his shirt-cuffs took off.

WINNIE.

I don't see why a man's cuffs shouldn't take off just as much as a woman's hair.

LORD SPRATTE.

I do. The auburn switch is a tribute to the superiority of my sex. It points to a pathetic desire on the part of lovely woman to make herself pleasing in my sight. The removable shirt-cuff indicates merely an economy in shirts.

WINNIE.

I think he's the most wonderful man I've ever seen in my life.

LORD SPRATTE.

Do you, by George! Have you told your father?

WINNIE.

[*Defiantly.*] No. But I mean to.

LORD SPRATTE.

I wonder what you mean by that.

WINNIE.

You all think I'm a child. You none of you seem to understand I'm a grown woman.

LORD SPRATTE.

I notice your sex generally claims to be misunderstood when it has a mind to do something foolish.

WINNIE.

Why shouldn't the cuffs take off?

LORD SPRATTE.

My dear, there's no reason at all. Nor have I ever been able to discover why you shouldn't eat peas with a knife or assassinate your grandmother. But I notice there is a prejudice against those things.

WINNIE.

If you heard him speak you wouldn't think of anything so trivial.

LORD SPRATTE.

Am I wrong in thinking that when he's excited or nervous he's not quite safe on his aitches?

WINNIE.

He's the greatest gentleman I've ever known.

PONSONBY *enters and meets* CANON SPRATTE
and RAILING *as they come out of the*
back drawing room.

PONSONBY.

Lord Wroxham has arrived, sir.

CANON SPRATTE.

Oh! . . . [*He gives RAILING a glance, evidently wishing him out of the room.*] Have you shown him into the library?

PONSONBY.

Yes, sir.

CANON SPRATTE.

Well . . . ask him to wait one moment.

PONSONBY.

Very good, sir.

RAILING, *seeing that CANON SPRATTE is occupied, holds out his hand. The CANON seizes it with relief.*

RAILING.

I think I'll be getting along.

CANON SPRATTE.

What, must you go already? Well, well, I daresay you're busy.

RAILING.

[*Shaking hands with LORD SPRATTE.*] Good-bye.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Bustling him.*] You must come and see us again, soon. I want to have a long talk with you. Oh, Ponsonby.

The CANON goes to PONSONBY and speaks in an undertone. LORD SPRATTE takes up the evening paper as a pretext and watches RAILING who goes over to say good-bye to WINNIE.

WINNIE.

Good-bye. You see they're not very terrible.

RAILING.

They're very kind.

WINNIE.

I know they'll all like you. I shall see you to-morrow, shan't I?

RAILING.

I shall think of nothing else till then.

WINNIE.

I *must* tell you again how grateful I am for all you've done for me.

RAILING.

I haven't done anything for you.

WINNIE.

I want to help you in your work. I want to work with you.

RAILING.

If I spoke well to-day, it was because I felt that your eyes were upon me.

WINNIE.

Good bye.

As RAILING goes out, CANON SPRATTE again cordially shakes hands with him.

CANON SPRATTE.

Good-bye, good-bye. Mind you come and hear me preach. Ah, here is Sophia.

LADY SOPHIA *comes in.*

CANON SPRATTE.

Mr. Railing refuses to waste any more of his time

on us. I was just telling him he must come and hear me preach.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*With a smile and a handshake.*] Oh, yes.

CANON SPRATTE.

You haven't heard me preach for a long time, Thomas.

RAILING *goes out.*

LORD SPRATTE.

My dear Theodore, I never hear you do anything else.

CANON SPRATTE.

That's not your own, Thomas.

LORD SPRATTE.

In these socialistic days I look upon it as affectation only to make my own jokes.

CANON SPRATTE.

That's an intelligent fellow. I like him very much. Remarkably brilliant, isn't he, Sophia?

LADY SOPHIA.

My dear Theodore, how could I judge? You never let him get a word in. He seemed an intelligent listener.

CANON SPRATTE.

Sophia, I may have faults, but no one has ever

accused me of usurping more than my fair share of the conversation. I daresay he was a little shy.

LADY SOPHIA.

I daresay.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Turning to his daughter.*] Oh, Winnie, I wonder if you'd mind fetching me the *Times*. It's in the library.

WINNIE.

Certainly.

She walks towards the door and stops suddenly.

WINNIE.

Didn't Ponsonby say Lord Wroxham was there?

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Smiling.*] He did.

WINNIE.

But . . .

CANON SPRATTE.

Unless I'm greatly mistaken he's waiting there to see you.

WINNIE.

Me? What on earth does he want?

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Going towards her and putting his arm round her shoulder.*] He will tell you that himself, my love.

WINNIE.

[*Shrinking back.*] But I can't see him. I don't want to.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Leading her to the door.*] My dear, you must. I can quite understand that you should feel a certain bashfulness. . . .

WINNIE.

[*Interrupting.*] But, I must speak to you first. I want to explain.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Good-humouredly.*] There's nothing to explain, my dear. I know all about it. And you need not be nervous. You go with my full approval.

WINNIE.

For goodness sake, let me speak.

CANON SPRATTE.

Come, come, my dear. You must pluck up courage. It's nothing very terrible. Go downstairs like a good girl, and I daresay you'll bring Lord Wroxham up with you.

*He opens the door and all but pushes her out.
Then he comes back, rubbing his hands
and laughing.*

CANON SPRATTE.

A little maidenly modesty. Very charming.

Very pretty. It's a lovely sight, my dear Sophia, that of the typical, creamy English girl, suffused in the blushes of virginal innocence.

LADY SOPHIA.

Fiddlesticks, Theodore.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Good-humouredly.*] You're a cynic, my dear. It's a grave fault of which I should recommend you to correct yourself.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Bridling.*] I beg you not to preach to me, Theodore.

CANON SPRATTE.

No man is a prophet in his own country. No man is a hero to his valet.

LORD SPRATTE.

I feel that you could preach a moving sermon on that topic, Theodore.

CANON SPRATTE.

Thomas, I wish to speak to you in your official capacity, if I may so call it. As the head of the family . . .

LORD SPRATTE.

[*Interrupting.*] My dear Theodore, merely by courtesy. I am unworthy. . . .

CANON SPRATTE.

That fact is sufficiently patent without your recalling it. But I should be obliged if at this moment, when the affairs of our house are at stake, you would adopt such sobriety and decorum as you are capable of.

LORD SPRATTE.

By Jupiter, I wish I'd got my coronation robes on.

LADY SOPHIA.

Go on, Theodore, don't keep us waiting.

CANON SPRATTE.

Well, you will both of you be gratified to hear that Lord Wroxham has asked my permission to pay his addresses to Winnie.

LORD SPRATTE.

And you fell upon him and said : *Rather*.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Freezing.*] I informed him that I had no objection to him as a son-in-law, and I enquired into his circumstances.

LORD SPRATTE.

What bloomin' check, when everyone knows he's got thirty thousand a year.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Taking no notice of his brother.*] And finally I

imparted to him my conviction that Winnie looked upon him with sincere affection.

LORD SPRATTE.

You are a downy old bird, Theodore.

CANON SPRATTE.

I did not expect that you would treat the matter with decorum, Thomas. And it was only from a strong sense of duty towards you as the head of my house that I requested your presence.

LORD SPRATTE.

[*Not at all abashed.*] Shut it, Theodore. You know very well that Wroxham can just about wipe his boots with the likes of us. There's a deuce of a difference between the twenty-first Lord Wroxham with half a county to his back and the second Earl Spratto.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*With great dignity.*] I should like you to understand once for all, Thomas, that I very much object to the sneering manner which you are pleased to affect with regard to our family. I am proud to be the son of the late Lord Chancellor of England, and the grandson of a distinguished banker.

LADY SOPHIA.

Fiddlesticks, Theodore. You know quite well that our grandfather was a bill-broker, and rather a seedy one at that.

CANON SPRATTE.

He was nothing of the sort. He was a most polished and accomplished gentleman.

LADY SOPHIA.

I remember him quite well. At home we always asked him to dinner the day after a party to eat up the scraps. I'm sure it never occurred to anyone that he was a distinguished banker until he was safely dead and buried.

LORD SPRATTE.

It's carried for bill-brokin'. And my belief is that the old chap did a bit of usury as well. It's no good stuffin' people, Theodore, they don't believe us.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Much amused.*] And what about the bill-broker's papa, Theodore?

LORD SPRATTE.

That's where the Montmorencys come in.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*With much dignity.*] I confess that I'm not quite certain what my great-grandfather was. But I know he was a gentleman.

LADY SOPHIA.

My dear, I've always had a sneaking sort of idea that he was a greengrocer.

LORD SPRATTE.

Ah, that beats the Montmorencys, by Jove. The

ancestral greengrocer—goin' out to wait at dinner parties in Bedford Square, and havin' a sly drink at the old sherry when no one was looking.

CANON SPRATTE.

I hope, Thomas, that you will have the good sense and the decorum to keep these observations from Wroxham. He's very sensitive on these matters.

LORD SPRATTE.

By the way, what would you say if Winnie refused him?

CANON SPRATTE.

What! Nonsense! Why should she? He's a very eligible young man, and he has my full approval.

LORD SPRATTE.

Supposin' she should take it into her head to marry that Socialist Johnny?

CANON SPRATTE.

Young Railing? Absurd.

LORD SPRATTE.

D'you think it's absurd, Sophia?

LADY SOPHIA.

[*With a shrug of the shoulders.*] She's her father's daughter.

CANON SPRATTE.

My daughter knows what is due to herself and to her family. She may be young, but she has a sense

of dignity which I should be pleased to see in you. Remember our motto: *Malo mori quam fœdari*—I prefer to die than to be disgraced.

LORD SPRATTE.

I always think we were overcharged for that.

CANON SPRATTE.

Of course, a fine sentiment merely excites your ribaldry.

LORD SPRATTE.

My dear Theodore, I've got the receipt among the family papers.

LADY SOPHIA.

I well remember the discussion between our father and mother when we were fixing up our coat of arms. Mother thought our crest should be a lion couchant, but father said: By George, madam, I should never have been made Lord Chancellor if I hadn't made my party sit up. I'll have a lion rampant and damn the College of Heralds.

CANON SPRATTE.

I see no point in that story at all, Sophia. Our coat of arms is just as genuine as that of half the great families in England.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Smiling.*] Oh, just. I'm quite aware of that.

WINNIE comes in. *She is pale and unhappy.*
The CANON goes towards her and takes
her in his arms.

CANON SPRATTE.

Ah, my child, my child. . . . But where is Lord Wroxham? Why haven't you brought him upstairs with you?

WINNIE.

[*Disengaging herself.*] Daddy, Lord Wroxham has asked me to marry him.

CANON SPRATTE.

He did it with my full approval.

WINNIE.

And I—I had to say. I refused him, daddy.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Starting back.*] What! You're joking. Oh, it's a mistake! I won't have it. Where is he?

He goes towards the door.

WINNIE.

[*Quickly.*] What are you doing? He's gone.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Coming back grimly.*] I suppose you're joking, Winnie. I am quite bewildered with all this humour.

WINNIE.

I'm already engaged to be married.

CANON SPRATTE.

You . . .? And to whom, pray?

WINNIE.

I'm engaged to Bertram Railing.

CANON SPRATTE.

Good Lord!

LORD SPRATTE *smothers a little chuckle.*

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Turning on him angrily.*] I think we shall proceed in this matter better without your presence; I regret that I cannot expect from you either assistance or sympathy, or any of the feelings to be awaited in a nobleman or a gentleman. I shall be grateful if you will take your departure.

LORD SPRATTE.

[*Good-humouredly.*] All right, Theodore. I don't want you to wash your dirty linen before me. Good-bye, Sophia.

He kisses LADY SOPHIA. CANON SPRATTE *turns angrily away as his brother goes towards him to shake hands.* LORD SPRATTE, *with a smile, goes to* WINNIE, *and puts his hand on her shoulder.*

LORD SPRATTE.

Never mind, Winnie, old girl. You marry the man you want to, and don't be jockeyed into takin' anyone else. I'll always back you up in anythin' unreasonable.

WINNIE.

It isn't unreasonable.

LORD SPRATTE.

By the way, don't let him wear a frock coat at the wedding. I think his legs are a little too short. He'd look stumpy.

WINNIE.

D'you suppose he cares what he wears? He has a soul above clothes.

LORD SPRATTE.

I gathered by the look of them that he had that sort of soul. [*To CANON SPRATTE.*] Am I keeping you?

CANON SPRATTE.

I can't expect you to believe that my time is any more valuable than yours.

LORD SPRATTE.

Well, so long. I hope you'll all have a very jolly half hour.

He goes out.

CANON SPRATTE.

Now, what does all this mean, Winnie? Am I to understand that you are serious?

WINNIE.

Quite.

CANON SPRATTE.

The whole thing is preposterous. Do you mean seriously to tell me that you are engaged to a penniless, unknown scribbler?

WINNIE.

It's most unfair to call him that, father, after the *Future of Socialism*.

CANON SPRATTE.

Any fool can write a book. It takes a wise man not to. . . . A man whom no one knows anything about. A rogue and a vagabond.

WINNIE.

Daddy, you said yourself he was a man of great intellect. You said you very much admired him.

CANON SPRATTE.

That proves only that I have good manners. When a mother shows me her baby, I say it's a beautiful child. I don't think it is a beautiful child, I think it's a very ugly child. I can't tell one baby from another, but I assure her it's the very image of its father. That's just common politeness. . . . How long has this absurd business been going on?

WINNIE.

I became engaged to him yesterday.

CANON SPRATTE.

You perceive, Sophia, that *I* was not consulted in this.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Mildly.*] Don't be ridiculous, Theodore.

WINNIE.

Oh, don't you understand, father? You can't

imagine what he's done for me. He's taught me everything I know. He's made me what I am.

CANON SPRATTE.

How long have you enjoyed the privilege of his acquaintance?

WINNIE.

Six weeks.

CANON SPRATTE.

Fancy.

WINNIE.

I was a fool. I was just the same as any other girl. I was happy for a week if I got a hat that suited me. And then I met him and everything was changed. He found me a foolish doll, and he's made me a woman. I'm so proud and so grateful to him. He's the first real man I've ever known.

CANON SPRATTE.

I should like to know what you find in him that you cannot find in Wroxham, or in—or in your father?

WINNIE.

I don't love Harry Wroxham.

CANON SPRATTE.

Fiddle-de-dee! A girl of your age doesn't know what love is.

WINNIE.

Harry Wroxham wants his wife to be a slave, a

plaything when he's tired or bored. I want to be a man's companion. I want to work with my husband.

CANON SPRATTE.

I'm surprised and shocked to hear you have such ideas, Winnie. I thought you were more modest.

WINNIE.

You *won't* understand, father. Don't you see that I have a life of my own, and I must live it in my own way?

CANON SPRATTE.

You're hopelessly behind the times, my poor girl. The new woman is as extinct as the dodo. Your ideas are not only silly, but middle-class. They fill me with disgust.

WINNIE.

You're making me dreadfully unhappy, daddy.

CANON SPRATTE.

Don't be absurd. I cannot make you marry Lord Wroxham. Far be it from me to attempt to force your affections. I confess it's a great disappointment. However, I accept it as the will of providence, and I shall do my best to bear it. But I'm quite sure it's not the will of providence that you should marry Mr. Bertram Railing. The man's nothing better than a fortune-hunter.

WINNIE.

That's not true, father.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Good-humouredly.*] I don't think you ought to contradict your father so flatly, my dear. It's not done.

WINNIE.

He's got no right to abuse the man I love more than the whole world.

CANON SPRATTE.

You're talking nonsense. I think you're a very disobedient and unaffectionate girl.

WINNIE.

After all, it's my business alone. It's my happiness that is concerned.

CANON SPRATTE.

How selfish you are. You don't consider my happiness.

WINNIE.

I've made up my mind to marry Bertram. I'm over twenty-one, and I'm my own mistress.

CANON SPRATTE.

What do you mean by that, Winnie?

WINNIE.

If you don't give me your consent, I shall marry without.

CANON SPRATTE *is thunderstruck. He walks up and down indignantly.*

CANON SPRATTE.

And this is the return I get for all the affection I have lavished upon my children. I've sacrificed myself to their every whim for years. And this is my reward.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*To WINNIE*] And do you know anything about this young man? Has he anything to live on?

WINNIE.

We shall work hard both of us. With what he earns and the little I have from my mother we can live like kings.

CANON SPRATTE.

In a flat at West Kensington, I suppose, or a villa at Hornsey Rise.

WINNIE.

With the man I love I'd live in a hovel.

CANON SPRATTE.

People often think that till they try it.

LADY SOPHIA.

Of course, it's a delicate question with that kind of person, but had he a father, or did he just grow?

WINNIE.

[*Defiantly.*] His father died many years ago. He was first mate on a collier trading from Newcastle.

LADY SOPHIA.

That I should imagine, as a profession, was neither lucrative or clean.

CANON SPRATTE.

At least it's something to be thankful for that his relations are dead.

WINNIE.

He has a mother and sister.

CANON SPRATTE.

And who are they, I should like to know?

WINNIE.

I don't know and I don't care. He has told me already that his mother is not a very highly educated woman.

CANON SPRATTE.

Where does she live?

WINNIE.

They have a little house in Peckham.

CANON SPRATTE.

Revolting. I wish to hear nothing more about it.

He walks towards the door, but WINNIE stops him.

WINNIE.

Daddy, don't go. Don't be angry with me. You do love me, and I love you, next to Bertram, better than anyone in the world.

CANON SPRATTE.

If you love me, Winnie, I don't know how you can cause me such pain. I must leave you to your own reflections. I think you ungrateful, disobedient and unkind. And it's only from regard to your sex and out of respect to the memory of your dead mother, that I don't say as well that I consider you stupid and vulgar. I beg you to go to your room.

Without a word WINNIE goes out.

CANON SPRATTE.

How sharper than a serpent's tooth. . . .

*He savagely kicks the evening paper which
LORD SPRATTE has dropped on the floor.
He looks at it and picks it up.*

CANON SPRATTE.

Sophia, I wish you'd take down a note to Wilson for me.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Sitting at the desk.*] Who is Wilson?

CANON SPRATTE.

He's a newspaper man. He does the clerical intelligence for two or three very important papers.

LADY SOPHIA.

Oh?

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Dictating.*] My dear Mr. Wilson. I wish you would announce in your valuable journals that there

is no truth in the rumour that I have been offered the vacant bishopric of Colchester. In these days of self-advertisement, I suppose it is too much to ask that people should keep silent on the positions to which they expect themselves or their friends to be elevated. But I cannot help thinking such a proceeding would be more decorous and more discreet. Yours most cordially.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Leaning back, with a smile.*] You are rather a downy old bird, Theodore, aren't you?

CANON SPRATTE.

I dont know what you mean, Sophia.

END OF ACT I.

ACT II.

The SCENE is the same as in the preceding Act, the drawing-room at St. Gregory's Vicarage. LADY SOPHIA is writing letters at a bureau. CANON SPRATTE enters, bland as ever, spruce and alert, with a newspaper in his hand.

CANON SPRATTE.

Well, Sophia?

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Rising.*] Oh, of course, I've not seen you to-day.

The CANON kisses her on the cheek.

CANON SPRATTE.

I've been lunching at the Athenæum, and I find everyone is expecting me to go to Colchester. Did you see the notice in this morning's paper?

LADY SOPHIA.

I've not had time to read it yet.

CANON SPRATTE.

I wish you took more interest in me. It's extraordinary that when there's anything about me in the paper, everyone sees it but my own family.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Good-humouredly.*] Please tell me what it is.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Reading.*] There is no truth in the rumour that Canon Spratte, Vicar of St. Gregory's, South Kensington, has been appointed to the vacant bishopric of Colchester.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Dryly.*] It will certainly remind those in power that there is no more excellent candidate.

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear Sophia, I honestly don't think anyone would call me a vain man, but I cannot think myself unsuitable for the position. I'm sure you will be the last to deny that my parentage gives me certain claims upon my country.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*With a dry smile.*] Which I suppose you took care to point out to Lady Patricia when you met her at dinner last night?

CANON SPRATTE.

Oh, no. I was discretion itself. I merely explained to her in the course of conversation how important it was that the bishops should be imbued with Conservative principles.

LADY SOPHIA.

And d'you think she swallowed the bait?

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear, I wish you would not express yourself quite so brutally.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Leaning back and looking at him critically.*] I often wonder if you humbug yourself as much as you humbug other people.

CANON SPRATTE.

Upon my soul, I don't know what you mean. I have always done my duty in that state of life in which it has pleased a merciful providence to place me. And if I may say so without vanity, I have done it with pleasure to myself and with profit to mankind.

LADY SOPHIA.

D'you remember our old nurse, Theodore?

CANON SPRATTE.

Her affection is one of the most charming recollections of my childhood.

LADY SOPHIA.

I always think she must have been an excellent judge of character. I remember how frequently she used to say: Master Theodore, self-praise is no recommendation.

CANON SPRATTE.

You certainly have the oddest memories, my dear. Now, I remember how frequently she used to remark: Miss Sophia, your nose wants blowing.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Bridling.*] She was a woman of no education, Theodore.

CANON SPRATTE.

That is precisely what your reminiscence led me to believe.

LADY SOPHIA.

Humph!

Enter LORD SPRATTE and MRS. FITZGERALD.

CANON SPRATTE.

Ah, dear lady, this is an unexpected pleasure. I thought you were out.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I got bored with my shopping, and as I was walking home through the park, I found Lord Spratte, so I brought him back with me to keep him out of mischief.

LORD SPRATTE.

I've reached an age when I can only get into mischief with an infinite deal of trouble, and when I've succeeded I find the game hardly worth the candle.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*To LORD SPRATTE.*] Theodore turned you out of the house very unceremoniously the other day, Tom.

CANON SPRATTE.

I hope you bear no malice.

LORD SPRATTE.

Not in the least, Theodore. I not only have a Christian disposition, but you have an excellent cook.

LADY SOPHIA.

Winnie seems determined to marry Mr. Railing.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You know, I can't help thinking it very romantic. It reminds me of that poem of dear Lord Tennyson's.

CANON SPRATTE.

Dear Lord Tennyson hadn't a marriageable daughter.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

When two young things are fond of one another, don't you think it's best to let them marry, whatever the disadvantages?

LADY SOPHIA.

The man isn't even a gentleman.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

But we've had it dinned into our ears that kind hearts are more than coronets.

CANON SPRATTE.

Yes, but we all know that they're nothing of the sort.

LORD SPRATTE.

What are you going to do, Theodore?

CANON SPRATTE.

I promise you that Winnie shall break her foolish engagement with this ridiculous counter-jumper, and, what's more, I promise you she shall marry Wroxham.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*Smiling.*] You'll need some very skilful diplomacy to achieve all that.

CANON SPRATTE.

People must get up early in the morning if they want to get the better of Theodore Spratte.

LADY SOPHIA.

What is your idea, Theodore?

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear, I rack my brains. I can't think of anything. It's monstrous that she should refuse Wroxham. He's got everything that a girl can want to make her happy. He's got the highest principles.

LORD SPRATTE.

And a very comfortable income.

CANON SPRATTE.

Though he's quite young, he has acquired a respected and assured position in the House of Lords.

LORD SPRATTE.

It is lucky we don't all take ourselves so seriously,

or we should have got long ago the only order the British people seem at all generous with now-a-days.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

What is that?

LORD SPRATTE.

The order of the boot.

MRS. FITZGERALD *gives a little ripple of laughter.*

CANON SPRATTE.

Oh, don't laugh at him. Don't encourage him in this criminal flippancy. [*To LORD SPRATTE.*] It's such as you who've brought the Upper House into discredit.

LORD SPRATTE.

Such as I, my dear Theodore? Why, I've been proppin' up the old place for years by the simple method of systematically avoiding it.

CANON SPRATTE.

Indeed.

LORD SPRATTE.

As long as we kept to shootin', huntin' and fishin', no one interfered with us. I went to the House of Lords the other day.

CANON SPRATTE.

You surprise me.

LORD SPRATTE.

Oh, it was quite accidental. I had to go to Westminster on business.

CANON SPRATTE.

Wonders will never cease.

LORD SPRATTE.

I had to see a terrier that a man wanted to sell. Well, I had a new topper on, and no umbrella, an' of course it began to rain. By Jupiter, I said, I'm hanged if I won't go and legislate for ten minutes. Well, I walked in, and somebody asked me who the dickens I was. Upon my word, I was almost ashamed to say. Spratte's a very awkward name to have to give to a policeman. It sounds so like a practical joke.

CANON SPRATTE.

A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

LORD SPRATTE.

Well, they let me in after a bit, and I found twenty old buffers lyin' about on red benches. Good lord, I said, who are their tailors? I listened to a funny old thing who was mumblin' away in his beard for a bit, and then I said to myself: shall I stay here and listen to this twaddle, or shall I get my hat wet. Suddenly I had an inspiration: By Jupiter, I thought, I'll take a taxi.

CANON SPRATTE.

Your levity grows more marked every day, Thomas.

I used to hope it was due chiefly to the exuberance of youth, but it seems that increasing years bring you no sense of your responsibilities.

LORD SPRATTE.

It shows what a charmin' nature I have to stand bein' ragged by my younger brother. What price primogeniture now!

CANON SPRATTE.

You forget that it's my name as well as yours that you drag through the dust.

LORD SPRATTE.

The name of Spratte?

CANON SPRATTE.

It was borne by the late Lord Chancellor of England.

LORD SPRATTE.

Oh, Theodore, don't drag him in again. I'm just about sick of him. It's been the curse of my life to be the son of an eminent man. After all, it was only by a beastly job that they stuck him on that silly old woolsack.

CANON SPRATTE.

Have you never heard the maxim: *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*?

LORD SPRATTE.

That means, don't pull an old buffer's leg when he's kicked the bucket.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Impatiently.*] You have no sense of decorum, no seemliness, no dignity.

LORD SPRATTE.

The fact is, I don't feel important enough. I can't stand all these gew-gaws. I don't want the silly title with its sham coat of arms and its bogus pedigree. And those ridiculous ermine robes. The very thought of them gives me goose-flesh. I should have been right enough if I'd been just plain Tom Spratte. I might have made a fairly good horse-dealer, and if I hadn't brains enough for that, I could always have gone into parliament. I'd have been a capital First Lord of the Admiralty because I can't tell a man-o'-war from a coal barge.

A bell is heard and the CANON gives a start.

CANON SPRATTE.

Oh! What's that!

MRS. FITZGERALD.

My dear Canon, what a state your nerves are in.

CANON SPRATTE.

It's the front door.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Do you always jump out of your skin when there's a ring at the bell?

LORD SPRATTE.

If it's a creditor, let me see him, Theodore. I'm used to dealing with the beasts.

CANON SPRATTE.

For goodness sake be serious, Thomas.

LADY SOPHIA.

What is the matter, Theodore?

CANON SPRATTE.

Don't you know that every bell may be a message from the Prime Minister? A note or a telegram. How do I know? But at all events the offer of the vacant bishopric. The last time there was a vacancy he practically assured me that I should have the next.

LADY SOPHIA.

He's probably done the same to half the schoolmasters in England.

CANON SPRATTE.

Nonsense! Who is there that could take it? They've none of them half the claims that I have. Besides, it's a ridiculous system altogether to give a bishopric to Tom Noddy because he's taught Latin verses to a parcel of stupid schoolboys. As the youngest son of the late Lord Chancellor of England, I think I may expect something from my country. I have a presentiment. I have a presentiment that Colchester will be offered to me.

LORD SPRATTE.

In that case, I have a presentiment that you will accept it.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*Smiling.*] I think you're the most ambitious man I've ever known.

CANON SPRATTE.

And if I am? Ambition, says the Swan of Avon, is the last infirmity of noble minds. But what is the use of ambition now? I should have lived four centuries ago, when a bishop might hold the destinies of Europe in the hollow of his hand. I feel in me the power to do great things. Sometimes I sit in my chair, and I can hardly bear my inaction. Good heavens, what is there for me to do? To preach sermons to a fashionable crowd, to preside on committees, to go to dinner parties in Mayfair. I've come into the world too late. I hear Ponsonby on the stairs.

Half unconsciously, as the door opens and PONSONBY enters, he throws himself into such an attitude as a man may adopt when he expects a message from the Prime Minister.

PONSONBY.

Miss Durant.

The CANON for a moment is not a little put out, but he recovers himself at once and goes forward to meet GWENDOLEN with his usual gallant friendliness.

CANON SPRATTE.

Ah, this is a pleasant surprise.

GWENDOLEN.

[*Shaking hands with* LADY SOPHIA.] How d'you do.

She gives her hands to the CANON who holds them during the conversation.

CANON SPRATTE.

How nice of you to come and see us.

GWENDOLEN.

I came to fetch Winnie.

CANON SPRATTE.

You break my heart. I was flattering myself that you'd come to see me.

GWENDOLEN.

[*Smiling.*] That would be dreadfully forward.

CANON SPRATTE.

Why are you blushing?

GWENDOLEN.

Why are you holding my hands?

CANON SPRATTE.

At my age it's of no consequence.

GWENDOLEN.

I think you're the youngest man I've ever known in my life.

CANON SPRATTE.

Ah, why don't we live in the eighteenth century, so that I might fall on one knee and kiss your hand in gratitude for that pretty speech?

LADY SOPHIA.

Don't believe a word he says, Gwendolen. Theodore has a peculiar talent for deluding our sex.

GWENDOLEN.

He has a peculiar talent for making himself agreeable.

CANON SPRATTE.

I belong to the old school which put lovely woman on a gilded pedestal, and worshipped the ground she trod on.

LORD SPRATTE.

Excuse me, but if she was on a gilded pedestal surely she wasn't treading on the ground.

CANON SPRATTE.

You have no poetry in your soul, Thomas.

LORD SPRATTE *has shaken hands with* MRS.
FITZGERALD.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Are you going?

LORD SPRATTE.

I prefer my family in homœopathic doses.

Exit.

GWENDOLEN.

You know you're going to be Bishop of Colchester, don't you?

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear child, that is not a subject upon which I allow my thoughts to dwell. I will not conceal from you that, as the youngest surviving son of the late Lord Chancellor, I think I have some claim upon my country. But in these matters there is so much ignoble wire-pulling, so much backstairs influence, to which my character is not suited and to which I could never bring myself to descend.

GWENDOLEN.

Father says it's all settled. I told him to use his influence. And you've got the liquor interest solid.

CANON SPRATTE.

When the church and the licensed victuallers stand shoulder to shoulder not all the powers of Satan can avail against them.

GWENDOLEN.

I wonder where Winnie is.

LADY SOPHIA.

She's certain to be in soon. She went down to Peckham.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Quickly.*] Where?

LADY SOPHIA.

Mr. Railing has taken her down to see his mother and sister.

CANON SPRATTE.

Why was'nt I told of this, Sophia?

LADY SOPHIA.

I suppose because Winnie knew perfectly well that you wouldn't approve.

CANON SPRATTE.

Listen.

The CANON'S exclamation is preceded by a ring at the bell, followed by a second and a third in rapid succession.

GWENDOLEN.

What is it?

CANON SPRATTE.

It's someone at the door.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Someone apparently in a great hurry.

The CANON throws himself again into the attitude of a man awaiting the call of his country. The door is flung open and LIONEL comes quickly in. This time CANON SPRATTE is unable to conceal his vexation.

CANON SPRATTE.

Oh, it's only you. I don't know why on earth you ring the bell as though the house were on fire.

LIONEL.

I say, father, have you heard about Colchester?

CANON SPRATTE.

Heard what?

For a moment he is uncertain whether to be elated or disappointed.

LIONEL.

It's announced that Dr. Gray, the headmaster of Harbin, has been appointed.

CANON SPRATTE.

Impossible.

LIONEL.

It's in the *Westminster*.

CANON SPRATTE.

The *Westminster* is a Radical paper, and would say anything. It can't be true. I make the best of my fellow-men, and I cannot bring myself to believe that the Prime Minister can be so wicked and foolish.

GWENDOLEN.

I am so sorry.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Recovering himself, with a gallant smile.*] Oh, my dear child, you mustn't let my affairs worry you.

GWENDOLEN.

I don't think I'll wait for Winnie after all.

CANON SPRATTE.

Lionel will take you down to your car. Good-bye, dear child. It's been like a ray of spring sunshine to see you.

GWENDOLEN.

Good-bye.

She goes out accompanied by LIONEL.

CANON SPRATTE.

Sophia, you must go and call on Lady Patricia.

LADY SOPHIA.

I?

CANON SPRATTE.

You must find out what all this means. I can't believe it. It's preposterous.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

But who is Dr. Gray?

CANON SPRATTE.

A man of no family. I cannot think the Government would be so crassly idiotic as to give an important bishopric to a man of Gray's powers. Powers? They're not powers; he's the most ordinary, stupid man I've ever known. He's more stupid than a churchwarden.

LADY SOPHIA.

My dear Theodore, do keep calm.

CANON SPRATTE.

How can I keep calm when I see such an odious job about to be perpetrated? And then the Government expects me to support it. How can any right-minded man support such corrupt and ignoble practices?

LADY SOPHIA.

I'll go and put on my hat.

CANON SPRATTE.

I thank heaven that I'm not a vain man. I may have faults. We all have faults.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*At the door.*] We do.

Exit.

CANON SPRATTE.

But no one has ever accused me of vanity. But this I will confess. I don't think I should have been out of place in that responsible position. I have been mixed up with public affairs, I may say all my life; I am used to responsibility and authority.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I'm afraid you're quite upset. Don't you think a glass of sherry would do you good?

CANON SPRATTE.

Ah, my dear lady, at this moment---at this moment I cannot think of sherry.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

It would keep you up.

CANON SPRATTE.

I could almost say that I will never drink sherry again.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

My poor Canon, I feel so sorry for you.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Taking her hands.*] Thank you, my dear, for sympathising with me. I have often felt that you really understood me. . . . It's a dreadful thing to be surrounded by persons who don't appreciate you. They say that no man is a prophet in his own country, and I have experienced that too. I am surrounded by cynical laughter and by flippant vulgarity. I don't want to say anything against Sophia. I daresay she does her best. But she has not the delicacy of sentiment necessary to understand a character like mine. Ah, you should have known my wife. She was an angel, loving, obedient, respectful, self-effacing. She was all that a wife should be. She was taken from me. I shall never get over it.

MRS. FITZGERALD *tries to disengage her hands.*

CANON SPRATTE.

What is the matter?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Nothing, except that you've been holding my hands quite long enough.

CANON SPRATTE.

Why shouldn't I hold them? We're old friends.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I want to scratch my nose.

CANON SPRATTE.

Such a pretty nose.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You really musn't say things like that to me.

CANON SPRATTE.

At such a moment anything I say is pardonable.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Will you give me possession of my hands, or must I scream for help?

CANON SPRATTE.

You talk as if we were perfect strangers, and heaven knows how many years it is since we first met.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

That's just it. Heaven knows that we're both of us quite old enough to have learnt how to behave ourselves.

CANON SPRATTE.

Nothing is so untruthful as Anno Domini. You don't look a day more than eighteen, and I'm sure I feel barely twenty-two.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*Laughing.*] How can you talk such nonsense?

CANON SPRATTE.

You think I'm joking, but I'm deadly serious.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Then there's no possible excuse for you.

CANON SPRATTE.

Does it mean nothing to you that the spring is smiling in the street and all the birds are quivering with song?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

What do you think Lionel would say if he heard you?

CANON SPRATTE.

Lionel is occupied with his own affairs. I sent him downstairs with Gwendolen, and if he's half the man his father is, he'll propose to her before she reaches her carriage.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Perhaps poor Lionel doesn't know how.

CANON SPRATTE.

It's so easy that I wonder how men ever remain

bachelors. The modern jewellery is so charming that you can hardly help admiring the lovely ring that adorns a lady's finger. And that leads you inevitably to take her hand.

He takes MRS. FITZGERALD'S hand, but she withdraws it.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I gather your meaning without your actually giving an example.

CANON SPRATTE.

Why are you so unkind to me?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I don't know how far you're going.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*With an imitation of a bus-conductor.*] All the way, Madam, all the way.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

How lucky I'm bringing my visit to an end to-morrow.

CANON SPRATTE.

I couldn't bear to think of you going so soon if it were not for the hope that I might induce you to come back—for good.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Do my ears deceive me, or is this a proposal of marriage that I'm listening to?

CANON SPRATTE.

It's a proposal of marriage.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Take it back quickly in case I accept.

CANON SPRATTE.

I insist on your accepting.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Then I'm quite sure you're not yourself today, and I shall refuse without further delay.

CANON SPRATTE.

As if I should take such a flippant answer as that.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You're really the most unexpected person I ever knew. Why on earth d'you want to marry me?

CANON SPRATTE.

Look in your glass, dear friend and it will tell you there are a hundred good reasons.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

And what d'you think your children would say to it?

CANON SPRATTE.

My children are making their own homes and I shall be left alone.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You've forgotten Sophia.

CANON SPRATTE.

Sophia can shave her head and go into a nunnery.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Sophia would like that, wouldn't she?

*He leans forward and is just about to kiss
her when she draws back.*

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*With assumed surprise.*] What are you going to do?

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Smiling.*] I was going to kiss you.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Oh, but I haven't accepted you.

CANON SPRATTE.

I never take a refusal.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

That must complicate a proposal of marriage wonderfully.

CANON SPRATTE.

I shall inform Sophia that you've promised to marry me.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I shall inform her that I've done nothing of the sort.

CANON SPRATTE.

I cannot imagine why you hesitate.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I'm not sure that I feel equal to the responsibilities of a clergyman's wife.

CANON SPRATTE.

You may be quite certain that I didn't venture to make you this proposal till I was fully convinced that you would admirably fill the position which I am so bold as to offer you.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I'm afraid you have a grossly exaggerated opinion of my merits, dear Canon.

CANON SPRATTE.

Won't you call me Theodore?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I really couldn't. It sounds so familiar.

CANON SPRATTE.

Perhaps you would care to go to your room.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Why?

CANON SPRATTE.

I thought you might like a few moments of solitude to think it over.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You're very thoughtful.

CANON SPRATTE.

That, if I may say so, is the least of my virtues.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*Demurely.*] I will retire to the privacy of my bedchamber.

She goes out. CANON SPRATTE walks towards another door. Passing a looking-glass he stops and runs his fingers through his hair. He takes a little comb from his pocket, and nicely arranges his silver locks. His face assumes a look of anxiety as he realises that his trousers are a little too long. He unbuttons his waistcoat and hoists his braces.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*With deep conviction.*] What a leg for a gaiter.

WINNIE comes in pale and tired. The CANON gives a slight start as he sees her, and then watches her walk wearily across the room. She sinks into a chair and begins moodily to tear off her gloves. It is plain that she is cross and wretched.

CANON SPRATTE.

You've returned safely from the wilds of Peckham? I trust you encountered no savage beasts in those unfrequented parts.

WINNIE.

[*Her answer is almost a groan.*] None.

The CANON pricks up his ears. The idea dawns on him that the visit to BERTRAM RAILING'S family has not been altogether a success.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Watching her keenly.*] I hope you enjoyed yourself, darling. You're very pale.

WINNIE.

I have rather a headache.

CANON SPRATTE.

You don't often have headaches. . . . And did your prospective mother-in-law take you to her bosom?

WINNIE.

She was very kind.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Very blandly.*] I imagine she was not exactly polished?

WINNIE.

I didn't expect her to be.

CANON SPRATTE.

But, of course, to you such things as that are nothing. True disinterestedness is such a beautiful thing, and in this world, alas! so rare. By the way, what is the address of your—of the young man you're walking out with.

WINNIE.

[*Defiantly.*] Asquith Villas, Gladstone Road,
Peckham.

CANON SPRATTE,

And Mrs. Railing, I think you said, was the
widow of a coal-heaver.

WINNIE.

Her husband was first mate on a collier.

CANON SPRATTE.

Does she smack of the briny, my dear—or does
she smack of Peckham Rye? [*He breaks into song.*]

For I'm no sailor bold,
And I've never been upon the sea,
And if I fell therein, it's a fact I couldn't swim,
And quickly at the bottom I should be.

My dear, how uncommunicative you are, and I'm
dying with curiosity. Tell me all about Miss Railing.
Aitchless, I presume?

WINNIE.

[*Almost breaking down.*] Oh, father, how can
you?

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear, I have no doubt that they are rough
diamonds. But you musn't be discouraged at that.
You must make the best of things.

WINNIE.

It's charming of you to give me good advice.

CANON SPRATTE.

Remember that externals are not everything. I'm sure that the Railings are very worthy people. It is, doubtless, possible to eat peas with a knife, and yet to have an excellent heart. I should imagine that your young man was devoted to his mother and sister. Those sort of people always are. One's less desirable relations are such patterns of affection. They're always talking of the beauty of a united family. But I have no doubt that you will soon accustom yourself to their little eccentricities of diction, to their superficial vulgarities of manner. Kind hearts are more than coronets, and simple faith than Norman blood.

WINNIE.

Father, I've given my solemn promise to Bertram, and I'd sooner die than break it.

The CANON walks up and down the room. Suddenly he determines to do what has been hovering in his mind since he saw WINNIE'S state upon returning from Peckham.

CANON SPRATTE.

My darling, nothing shall stand between you and my great affection. If your heart is set upon marrying this young fellow—I withdraw my opposition.

[She springs up and looks at him.]

WINNIE.

Father!

CANON SPRATTE.

I have come to the conclusion that it is wrong, and even wicked, for a parent to attempt to influence his children's matrimonial choice. Their youth and inexperience naturally make them so much more capable of judging for themselves.

Before WINNIE has got over her astonishment, in which there is ever so slight a suspicion of dismay, the door is opened by
PONSONBY.

PONSONBY.

Lord Wroxham.

LORD WROXHAM *enters.* He is a young man with no particular distinction of appearance. He is dark, with a small moustache, and he wears pince-nez. No one would look twice at him. He is not in the least good-looking, but he is well-dressed and of gentlemanly appearance. CANON SPRATTE is, as usual, master of the situation, and as WROXHAM comes in he goes up to him with cordiality, but with every appearance of being in a great hurry.

CANON SPRATTE.

Ah, my dear fellow, how nice of you to come. The very man I wanted to see. But you must excuse me one moment. A clergyman's time is never his own, you know, never for a moment. There's a poor woman waiting to see me downstairs; she's

lost her first husband and she's looking everywhere for number two, and she can't find him. I shall only be five minutes.

*Before WROXHAM can utter a word, CANON SPRATTE has swept out, singing gaily :
"For I'm no sailor bold." For a moment WINNIE and WROXHAM look at one another in silence.*

WROXHAM.

You're not angry with me for coming, Winnie?

WINNIE.

Good heavens, why should I be? We've been friends for ages. It would be absurd if we never saw one another again because -- because of the other day. You know I'm always glad to see you.

WROXHAM.

I couldn't take your answer as final.

WINNIE.

[*Hurriedly.*] Oh, don't, please.

WROXHAM.

I don't want to bother you and make you miserable, but don't you care for me at all? Don't you think that after a time you might get to like me?

WINNIE.

I told you the other day it was impossible.

WROXHAM.

Oh, I know. But then I couldn't say what I wanted to. I couldn't understand. Like a fool, I thought you cared for me. I was so awfully keen on you that it seemed impossible I should be nothing to you at all.

WINNIE.

Please don't say anything more. It's so kind of you, and I don't know how to thank you, but I can't marry you.

WROXHAM.

But I want to say this: *I* shall never care for anyone else. If by any chance you should ever change your mind you'd find me—waiting for you, don't you know. Of course, I don't want any promise, or encouragement, or anything of that sort, but I'd just like you to know that you can always count on me.

WINNIE.

I didn't know you were so kind. I misjudged you. I thought you treated me like a fool. I'm sorry. Don't be wretched because I can't marry you. I'm not worth troubling about.

*She gives him her hand, and he, holding it,
looks into her eyes.*

WROXHAM.

Is anything the matter?

WINNIE.

[*Trying to smile, flushing to the roots of her hair.*]
No, what should be?

WROXHAM.

You look so—so unlike yourself.

WINNIE.

I've got rather a headache. There's really nothing else . . . Oh, there's father.

They hear him gaily singing outside, and WINNIE quickly steps out of the room by another door as he comes in. He goes towards WROXHAM with all his affability.

CANON SPRATTE.

I hope I haven't kept you waiting. Has Winnie left you? Where are the child's manners?

WROXHAM.

I've been talking to her. I don't think I quite understand her. I thought she'd been crying when I came in.

CANON SPRATTE.

All women cry when they have nothing better to do. It's the only inexpensive form of amusement they have.

WROXHAM.

I asked her to marry me, Canon Spratte.

CANON SPRATTE.

And of course she refused. No nice girl accepts a man the first three times he asks her.

WROXHAM.

Winnie is so different from other girls.

CANON SPRATTE.

Every man thinks the girl he wants to marry different from every other. But she's not. All women are pretty much of a muchness, and that is why on the whole they make tolerable wives and mothers. No, my dear Wroxham, you have my full approval, and you have my assurance that Winnie undoubtedly cares for you. What more can you want? Hammer away, my dear sir, hammer away. The proper manner to deal with a woman is to ask her in season and out of season. Worry her as a terrier worries a bone. Insist on marrying her. And sooner or later she'll say yes, and think herself a prodigious fool for not having done so before.

WROXHAM.

You're very encouraging.

CANON SPRATTE.

Believe me, there are few men who have more experience in the management of the sex than I.

WROXHAM.

[*With a rather rueful smile.*] You speak as if you'd conducted with success a harem of more than common dimensions.

CANON SPRATTE.

I confess that has not been among my experiences, but if the occasion arose, I have no doubt of my capacity to deal satisfactorily with the situation.

WROXHAM.

Good-bye.

CANON SPRATTE.

Good-bye, my dear fellow. You must come and see us again in a day or two. I think it not impossible that you will find dear Winnie in a very different state of mind. Good bye.

WROXHAM.

Good-bye, and thanks awfully.

They shake hands and LORD WROXHAM goes out. CANON SPRATTE walks up and down in high humour, rubbing his hands.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Singing.*]

For I'm no sailor bold,
And I've never been upon the sea,
And if I fell therein, it's a fact I couldn't swim,
And quickly at the bottom I should be.

He sits down at a desk and with a smile on his face writes a short note. He puts it into an envelope and addresses it.

Asquith Villas, Gladstone Road, Peckham.

Just as he has fastened the envelope, MRS. FITZGERALD comes sailing in. The CANON springs to his feet and goes towards her with outstretched hands.

CANON SPRATTE.

You come in like a ray of spring sunshine.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You've already said that to Gwendolen Durant today.

CANON SPRATTE.

Have I? The difference between a great man and a little one is that the great man never hesitates to repeat himself.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I've been thinking over your very flattering proposal, dear Canon.

CANON SPRATTE.

And you have good news for me. I see it in your smiling eyes.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I wonder if you meant it quite seriously.

CANON SPRATTE.

Of course I meant it, every word of it, with all my heart. Do you think I'm a boy not to know my own mind?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I think you're a very susceptible man, and you're sometimes carried away by the force of your own eloquence.

CANON SPRATTE.

It was no sudden whim on my part. Ah, why can't I make you believe that love may spring up in a man's heart even though his hair is strewn with silver? I tell you I'm passionately devoted to you, and I insist on marrying you.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Don't say such things. You make my heart go pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat.

CANON SPRATTE.

We'll have a dozen bishops to marry us, and Tom shall lend us Beacheombe for our honeymoon. Or would you prefer the Italian lakes?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You go so quickly. You positively take my breath away.

CANON SPRATTE.

You see, I have no time to lose.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Then let us talk business.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*With a fine gesture of distaste.*] Why should we? You know I'm not mercenary. Let us pretend that no tiresome matters have to be discussed. We can leave it all to our solicitors.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

But it's very important.

CANON SPRATTE.

Nonsense. Nothing's important except that you're the most charming woman I've ever seen in my life. I'm a lucky dog to have got hold of you. We'll never grow older than we are now. We'll only grow younger year by year. When will you make me the happiest man in London?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

For heaven's sake sit down quietly and let me get a word in.

CANON SPRATTE.

I won't give you a moment's peace till you've fixed the day.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Gracious, what a man it is. You shall fix the day yourself.

CANON SPRATTE.

I said so. Worry her as a terrier worries a bone. Hammer away, my dear sir, hammer away.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You shall fix the day yourself after I've told you what I've been vainly trying to say for the last ten minutes.

CANON SPRATTE.

Shall we say six weeks from now? That will bring us to the end of the season, and I can safely leave Lionel to preach to a regiment of empty pews.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

For goodness sake, let me speak.

CANON SPRATTE.

What an obstinate woman! Well, speak on. It shall never be said that I hesitated to give way to your smallest whim.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

What I wanted to tell you is that I have an income of five thousand a year.

CANON SPRATTE.

I cannot bear these gross and sordid details. Of course it shall be settled absolutely upon you. What more is there to be said?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Only that it ceases on the day I marry again.

The CANON'S face suddenly falls. There is the briefest possible pause.

CANON SPRATTE.

All of it?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Every penny. My husband was a very generous man, but he had, apparently, no desire to provide for the wants of his successor.

CANON SPRATTE *struggles to master his very pardonable emotion. He finds some difficulty in breathing—the room on a sudden seems extraordinarily stuffy.*

CANON SPRATTE.

I'm very glad. You will be more precious to me with the thought that I alone am providing for you. It will sustain me in my work to think that you are—if I may say so—dependent upon me.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Do you realize that I shall be so penniless that you will even have to provide the clothes for my back, and my very fare when I take the tube?

CANON SPRATTE.

I shall look upon it as an enviable privilege.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I was a little afraid that you might not love me solely for myself, but every word you say proves that I was wrong.

CANON SPRATTE.

If I hesitated for a moment to ask you to marry me it was only because your greater income might have cast suspicion on the purity of my motives.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You have a noble character, Theodore. You may kiss me.

She puts forward her cheek, and he grimly, with rage, disappointment and mortification in his heart, does his duty.

END OF ACT II.

ACT III.

The SCENE is the same as the preceding Acts. The room is empty when the Curtain rises, but in a moment CANON SPRATTE comes in. He rings the bell. PONSONBY enters.

CANON SPRATTE.

Is Mr. Lionel in, Ponsonby?

PONSONBY.

I'll find out, sir.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*As PONSONBY is leaving the room.*] And you might ask her ladyship if she'd be good enough to come to the drawing-room.

PONSONBY.

Very good, Sir.

Exit. After an interval LADY SOPHIA comes in with MRS. FITZGERALD.

CANON SPRATTE.

I hope I've not disturbed you.

LADY SOPHIA.

We were wondering if you were in.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I wanted to say good-bye to you. I should have been so disappointed if I'd gone without seeing you.

CANON SPRATTE.

You don't mean to say you're leaving us?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

My train starts in an hour.

CANON SPRATTE.

This is extraordinarily sudden.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

It isn't really. You only asked me to stay till Friday.

CANON SPRATTE.

But didn't Sophia insist on your stopping over the week-end?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*Smiling.*] I can't honestly say she did.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*With a chuckle.*] My dear, your washing came home last night.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*To Mrs. FITZGERALD.*] It's too bad of you. Oh, Sophia, I wanted to tell you that I'm expecting Mr. and Mrs. Railing to tea to-day.

LADY SOPHIA.

Winnie told me you'd consented to the engagement.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Chaffing her.*] It must be a match after your own heart, my dear. You have always affected to look down upon our family. You must be pleased that the descendant of your ancestral greengrocer should form an alliance with the near connection of a coal-heaver. They pair like chalk and cheese.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

And when are they to be married?

CANON SPRATTE.

They're not to be married.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

My head is beginning to swim.

CANON SPRATTE.

Winnie is going to marry Lord Wroxham.

LADY SOPHIA.

And d'you think the best way to bring that about is to let her be engaged to somebody else?

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear Sophia, have you ever known me make a mistake yet?

LADY SOPHIA.

Frequently. Though I'm bound to say I've never known you acknowledge it.

CANON SPRATTE.

It comes to the same thing. Like the typical Englishman, I never know when I'm beaten.

LADY SOPHIA.

Good heavens, what a man it is ! One can't even remark that it's a fine day without your extracting a compliment from it. Master Theodore, self praise is no recommendation.

CANON SPRATTE.

Miss Sophia, your nose wants blowing.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Stiffly.*] That, I think, is rather vulgar, Theodore.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Do explain yourself, Canon.

CANON SPRATTE.

Well, I flatter myself . . .

LADY SOPHIA.

You frequently do, my dear.

CANON SPRATTE.

I flatter myself that I know my daughter's character. Now, I am convinced that if I had put my foot down, Winnie would have gone off and married the man there and then. But I know the Spratte character inside out. We are a family of marked idiosyncracies.

LADY SOPHIA.

Inherited from the Montmorencys, I suppose.

CANON SPRATTE.

I have no doubt. You will remember in our father the firmness and decision of which I speak.

LADY SOPHIA.

I remember that he was as obstinate as a pig.

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear, I do not want to rebuke you, but I really must ask you not to make these unseemly remarks. If you are incapable of recognising the respect due to your father, I would have you recollect that he was also Lord Chancellor of England.

LADY SOPHIA.

Do you ever give me the chance to forget it!

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*Smiling.*] But what exactly has that to do with Winnie?

CANON SPRATTE.

I was about to observe that whatever my faults, when I make up my mind that a thing is right, no power on earth can prevent me from doing it. Now, I do not wish to be offensive, but I cannot help perceiving that the firmness, which, if I may say it without vanity, is so marked a characteristic in me, is apt in other members of our family to degenerate into something which the uncharitable may well call obstinacy.

LADY SOPHIA.

Upon my word, Theodore, it's fortunate you told me you had no wish to be offensive.

CANON SPRATTE.

Please don't interrupt. Now, I am dealing with Winnie as the Irishman deals with the pig he is taking to market. He pulls the way he doesn't want to go, and the pig quite happily goes the other.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Even now I'm afraid I don't understand.

CANON SPRATTE.

When Winnie said she would marry Mr. Railing she didn't reckon on Mr. Railing's mamma, and she didn't reckon on Mr. Railing's sister. In such cases the man has often educated himself into something that passes muster, and your sex has no great skill in discerning a gentleman from the spurious article. But the women! My dear lady, I tell you Winnie won't like them at all.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

The more repulsive his relations are, the more her pride will force Winnie to keep her promise.

CANON SPRATTE.

We shall see.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Like all great plans, it has a certain effective obviousness about it.

LADY SOPHIA.

Are you quite sure it's honest, Theodore?

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear Sophia, what *do* you mean?

LADY SOPHIA.

It seems to me a little underhand.

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear, I do not wish to remind you that I am a clergyman, though occasionally you seem strangely oblivious of the fact. But I should like to point out to you that it's unlikely, to say the least of it, that a man of my position in the church should do anything dishonest or underhand.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*With a little smile.*] My dear brother, if as Vicar of St. Gregory's and Canon of Tercanbury you assure me that you are acting like a Christian and a gentleman—of course, I haven't the temerity to say anything further.

CANON SPRATTE.

You may set your mind at rest. You can be quite sure that whatever I do is right.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Upon my word, you're a very extraordinary man, Canon.

CANON SPRATTE.

That, madam, is a fact which had not entirely

escaped my observation. By the way, Sophia, I wonder if you'd ring up Thomas and ask him to look in.

LADY SOPHIA.

I'll tell Ponsonby to telephone.

CANON SPRATTE.

Do it yourself, there's a dear. Ponsonby's growing so stupid, and I'm particularly anxious Thomas should come this afternoon.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Good-naturally.*] You are a troublesome creature.

She goes out.

CANON SPRATTE.

I haven't the remotest desire to see Thomas, but that was the only way I could think of to get poor Sophia out of the light.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Why did you want to do that?

CANON SPRATTE.

So that I might be alone with you.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

That's very flattering.

CANON SPRATTE.

I'm going to scold you for leaving us so suddenly. Have you no regard for my feelings

MRS. FITZGERALD.

That's precisely why I'm leaving you.

CANON SPRATTE.

I've not had a moment alone with you since you promised to be my wife.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

When I think of the long companionship of married life, I'm convinced that engaged persons should see as little of one another as they can.

CANON SPRATTE.

I believe you said you were thinking of going to Ascot.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

That was my intention.

CANON SPRATTE.

Of course, I have no right to preach to you, but— isn't it a little worldly?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I *am* a little worldly.

CANON SPRATTE.

I'm afraid you'll have to abandon many luxuries when you're mistress of my humble vicarage. There'll be no little visits to Ascot then.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I'm not cynical. I believe devoutly in love in a cottage.

CANON SPRATTE.

I understand people often do till they try it. I'm afraid we shan't be able to afford a car.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I'm beginning to think a bath-chair fulfils all my aspirations.

CANON SPRATTE.

And will you think me very unkind if I suggest that you must do without a maid?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I'm sure it will amuse me immensely to darn my own stockings.

CANON SPRATTE.

Are you fond of district visiting?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I love to interfere with other people's concerns. And it's only the poor who can't actively resent it.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*With a show of frankness.*] I don't know whether you realise that I'm full of faults.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You would be very tedious without.

CANON SPRATTE.

You'll find me impatient and exacting, ill-tempered and overbearing. I'm anxious that you should know the worst before it's too late.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

It's so charming of you to tell me. Now I can confess without a qualm that I'm quarrelsome and vain, extravagant and untruthful.

CANON SPRATTE.

They say that mutual confidence is the best foundation for a happy marriage.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I don't think our married life will be devoid of incident.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Reflectively.*] I knew a man a little while ago who told me that he'd never spent such a moment of dismay as when he saw his engagement announced in *The Morning Post*.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I knew a woman who when she read hers, cried : "Talk of tarpon."

CANON SPRATTE.

I don't know what she meant.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

She meant he was a difficult fish to catch, but she'd landed him at last.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Stiffly.*] I don't think your friend can have been a very nice person.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

She was a widow, and as you have the best reasons for knowing, they're always dangerous. . . . Have you told Sophia that we're engaged?

CANON SPRATTE.

No, I haven't yet.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Oh!

CANON SPRATTE.

I thought it would be rather a joke if we made a secret of it for a little while.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You have a very keen sense of humour.

CANON SPRATTE.

Of course, if you wish me to, I'll cry it from the housetops at once.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

That would be both unbecoming and dangerous.

CANON SPRATTE.

You see, the date of our marriage is necessarily uncertain.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Is it?

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Feeling his way.*] I don't think we went into that question, did we?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Surely you asked me if I could be ready in six weeks.

CANON SPRATTE.

How stupid of me to forget! Of course I did. My memory is so bad, it's really quite time they made me a bishop.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

But, of course, it would be indecent if I showed the least eagerness to succumb to your fascinations. It's right and proper that Amaryllis should display a retiring disposition.

CANON SPRATTE.

While Corydon is ardent and will hear of no delay.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I don't know if the world was topsy turvey then, or if it's topsy-turvey now.

CANON SPRATTE.

I will be perfectly frank with you. I will not attempt to conceal from you that what you told me yesterday about—the subject is infinitely distasteful to me.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

About my husband's will?

CANON SPRATTE.

Exactly. . . . It *has* made some alteration in the matter. It would be insincere to deny it. Not in my feelings, of course.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I know you too well to suspect that.

CANON SPRATTE.

Your poverty can only make my love the greater.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You know, Theodore, I'm almost glad that I shall have no money. It delights me to think that I shall owe nothing to a living soul but you—and a certain number of tradesmen. I wish now I'd paid ready money for everything.

CANON SPRATTE.

I hope you're not heavily in debt?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Oh, six or seven hundred pounds at the utmost.

CANON SPRATTE.

I can quite believe that what I'm going to say is liable to misconstruction. But I know how sympathetic you are. That's what first drew me towards you. I can trust you to understand me. I would give the whole world rather than you should think me mercenary.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I'm quite certain that you'll say nothing without the best of motives, Theodore.

CANON SPRATTE.

Yesterday I asked you to marry me as quickly as

possible. Would you think it very odd if to-day I asked you to wait?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I should think it very wise.

CANON SPRATTE.

After all, my first duty is to you, isn't it?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*Earnestly.*] I know very well that there's no thought for yourself in anything you say.

CANON SPRATTE.

I *can't* ask you to face poverty with me. You're too unused to it. I've tried to persuade myself, but I *can't*. It would be sheer selfishness on my part if I yielded to my own inclinations.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I think you're very generous.

CANON SPRATTE.

I daresay you know my income is not large.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

I looked it out in the clergy list.

CANON SPRATTE.

I shall have to spend a good deal on Winnie's trousseau. I have every belief that Lionel will bring it off with Gwendolen Durant, and it's true she's got sixty thousand pounds, but in common decency I must make him some sort of allowance.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

You certainly have a great many expenses.

CANON SPRATTE.

In a year or two all sorts of things may happen. Of course they've given Colchester to a trumpery head-master, but after all more than one of the bishops is very old and doddering. I have a good deal of influence at head-quarters.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Already you look every inch a bishop.

CANON SPRATTE.

I know I'm asking a good deal, but would you very much mind waiting a year or two for me?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Are you certain you wouldn't prefer not to be bound by an engagement?

CANON SPRATTE.

Surely you have not so poor an opinion of me as to think I am capable of abandoning our projected union because you're not so rich as I thought?

MRS. FITZGERALD.

My dear friend, has it ever occurred to you that there are two sorts of love? There's one that's like the sweet-pea: a young thing falls in love with another young thing, and their heads are turned, so they marry and have seventeen children and live miserably ever after. Then there's another sort of

love that's like the eating-pea : a well-bred person, not without means, falls in love with another well-bred person, whose circumstances are adequate. His passion is perfectly sincere, but he'd have no difficulty in restraining it within safe limits if the lady had not a large enough income to prevent marriage from being inconvenient. The sweet-pea is very delightful and we all admire it, but the eating-pea is both practical and sustaining.

CANON SPRATTE.

Your simile leaves me unmoved.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Remember that you're a young man, and two or three years will make no difference to you, but in three years I shall be at least *five* years older than I am now. I'm afraid that is one of the injustices of fate that votes for women will not be able to remedy.

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear friend, I am attracted to no passing charms of your person, but rather to the enduring qualities of your mind.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Don't say that. It's how a man always tries to console a thoroughly plain woman.

CANON SPRATTE.

I should be the last to deny that your personal attractions are considerable.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

[*With a little bob.*] Thank you, sir.

There is a moment's pause, while he wavers uncertainly. She watches him with serious face, but with brightly twinkling eyes.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Shall we forget that the other day you murmured in my shell-like ear various things which you didn't quite mean?

CANON SPRATTE.

I should be contemptible if I asked you to give me back my word.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

It's no sacrifice when I think of your future. I see already those shapely calves encased in the gaiters episcopal.

CANON SPRATTE.

You'd despise me all your life if I—accepted your suggestion.

She looks at him for a moment, enjoying his embarrassment. At last she cannot restrain a chuckle.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

My dear man, do you suppose for a moment that I had any intention of marrying you?

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Astounded.*] I beg your pardon.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Nothing would have induced me to do it. If I let you think so for four-and-twenty hours it was from pure devilry.

CANON SPRATTE.

D'you mean to say you've been playing with me all the time?

MRS. FITZGERALD,

I rather liked you. And it's always nice to be proposed to.

CANON SPRATTE.

You likened the two sorts of love just now to the sweet-pea and the eating pea. I don't want to seem discourteous, but your emotion reminds me chiefly of the scarlet runner.

MRS. FITZGERALD.

Let us forget all about it. You're perfectly free, and there's no need whatever for you to marry me. Let us be friends. You're charming as a friend, but as a husband you'd be quite insufferable. And don't flirt any more with widow-ladies. They're dreadfully dangerous. Good-bye, I've had such a jolly time.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Bowing stiffly.*] It rejoices me to hear it.

MRS. FITZGERALD *goes out.* CANON SPRATTE *draws a long breath of relief. It has been an awkward quarter of an hour, but it is over, and he is free. The door is opened and WINNIE comes in.*

CANON SPRATTE.

There you are. I was wondering what on earth had become of you.

WINNIE.

I wrote to Bertram and told him you consented to our engagement.

CANON SPRATTE.

He must be in the seventh heaven of delight.

WINNIE.

I've just had a note from him. He's coming round.

CANON SPRATTE.

I'm pleased to see you looking so happy, darling. [*LADY SOPHIA comes into the room as he says these words and he turns to her.*] Our children, Sophia, are often a sore trial to us, but we must take the rough with the smooth. At times also they give us a great deal of self-satisfaction.

WINNIE.

I'm afraid Aunt Sophia isn't very pleased.

LADY SOPHIA.

My dear, if you love him and your father approves, I don't think there's anything more to be said. I suppose he'll go into parliament, and I daresay it's not a bad thing he's a Socialist. I don't think they want clever young men on our side, they want them rich.

CANON SPRATTE.

I daresay we shall be able to get him something or other.

LADY SOPHIA.

It doesn't seem to matter whether you're a Radical or a Tory: when there's a job going, you take it.

Enter PONSONBY, followed by BERTRAM RAILING.

PONSONBY.

Mr. Railing.

CANON SPRATTE.

We were just talking of you.

RAILING.

I want you to know how grateful I am for. . . .

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Interrupting.*] Not a word, my dear fellow.

RAILING.

I wanted to speak to you before, but Winnie wouldn't let me.

CANON SPRATTE.

All's well that ends well, my dear fellow. Sophia, I have something to say to you. Come into the next room for a minute, will you?

THE CANON and LADY SOPHIA go into the inner drawing-room. BERTRAM stretches out his hands.

RAILING.

Well?

WINNIE.

Well?

RAILING.

What a discreet man your father is.

He draws her towards him, but she slightly resists.

WINNIE.

Take care.

RAILING.

What d'you think your father took Lady Sophia away for?

WINNIE.

They seem less put out than I expected.

RAILING.

I'm so tremendously happy. Sit down.

They seat themselves and he tries to put his arm round her waist. She draws away from him.

WINNIE.

Please don't.

RAILING.

[*Surprised.*] Why on earth not?

WINNIE.

I should feel such a fool if someone came in.

RAILING.

But if we're engaged what does it matter? Why, when my sister Louise was engaged we used to leave

the front-room for them, and when anyone had to go in they gave the door a good old rattle.

WINNIE.

Your sister isn't married, is she?

RAILING.

Oh, no, she broke it off. He wasn't quite up to her mark. She's an advanced Radical and a social worker, you know. And he was rather an ordinary young fellow. He was a solicitor's clerk. Louise is very brainy and he hadn't the remotest ideas about art. He wouldn't go and see a play unless he was sure it would make him laugh.

WINNIE.

I rather like being amused at the theatre myself.

RAILING.

Oh, we'll get you out of that. The drama is destined to something nobler than to entertain.

WINNIE.

Bertram, I wish you'd tell me, do your cuffs take off?

RAILING.

What on earth makes you ask that?

WINNIE.

I was wondering.

RAILING.

As a matter of fact they do. It's an awfully ingenious plan. [*He pushes up his sleeves and shows*

the arrangement which he describes.] You see, they button on, and you just turn them round—it's only the edges that have got dirty—and it looks as if you had a clean shirt on. It saves no end of washing.

WINNIE.

I thought men wore a clean shirt every day.

RAILING.

Only on account of the cuffs.

WINNIE.

I wish you'd ask Uncle Tom to give you an introduction to his tailor. I'm sure he'd be delighted.

RAILING.

Why, what's wrong with the clothes I've got on?

WINNIE.

They're very nice, but I don't think they're so nice as Uncle Tom's.

RAILING.

I expect he goes to somebody in Savile Row. I could never afford that.

WINNIE.

But you wouldn't have to pay. Uncle Tom never pays his tailor. Men don't.

RAILING.

But I've never owed a penny in my life. That's one thing that mother taught me from the beginning: pay as you go, she said, and it's one of the best

things I ever learnt. I bought this suit in the City off the nail.

WINNIE.

But you couldn't be married in a ready-made suit, Bertram.

RAILING.

Good gracious me, who not? I'm going to be married in this very suit I've got on. I'll put on a clean shirt if you like.

WINNIE.

Aunt Sophia said you'd probably go into parliament after we were married.

RAILING.

I've got the offer of a labour seat at the next election. A safe one this time.

WINNIE.

[*Tentatively.*] Papa says he'll be able to get you made something.

RAILING.

What d'you mean?

WINNIE.

There always are jobs, aren't there, and papa has a lot of influence with the Government.

RAILING.

My dear, what d'you take me for?

WINNIE.

But don't you want to get on? You wouldn't be

content to remain a scrubby journalist all your life, would you?

RAILING.

[*Kneeling down beside her.*] Oh, my darling, don't you understand? I'm nothing. I'm only an instrument and I'm proud to be an instrument. Whether I'm poor or rich, what does it matter? [*He takes her hands and his voice grows extraordinarily caressing.*] In the few years of my life I want to work for my fellows. I want you to work with me. I don't offer you ease and comfort. I offer you poverty and hardship and the weary, weary round of every day. I want you to know the misery of this horrible civilisation of ours. The injustice, the cruelty. You ask me if I want to get on. And I think of those long processions of the workless. And I see the fear in their eyes, the fear of the horrible to-morrow, cold and hungry and hopeless. D'you know that all through the winter nights the bobby walks up and down the embankment to prevent the poor homeless wretches from sleeping in case they freeze to death.

WINNIE.

Oh don't, don't.

RAILING.

I wonder if you ever think of the Nazarene who was the friend of the poor, the outcast and the leper. Sometimes in a common lodging-house I see a carpenter out of work, and I wonder . . . sometimes I think He looks at me through the eyes of a mason carrying his hod, and sometimes He speaks to me

in the humility of the scavenger who sweeps the streets.

WINNIE.

You make me feel such a cad.

RAILING.

I don't want to do that.

WINNIE.

I'm so ashamed. Oh, teach me to be more worthy of you, Bertram.

*She bends down and he kisses her on the lips.
At that moment CANON SPRATTE is heard
singing.*

For I'm no sailor bold,
And I've never been upon the sea.

He comes in joyously.

CANON SPRATTE.

Your uncle has just driven up, Winnie.

PONSONBY comes in and announces LORD
SPRATTE, who follows on his heels.

PONSONBY.

Lord Spratte.

Exit.

LORD SPRATTE.

How d'you do?

CANON SPRATTE.

You remember Mr. Railing, don't you?

LORD SPRATTE.

[*Shaking hands with him.*] I hear that I have to congratulate you.

RAILING.

It's very kind of you.

CANON SPRATTE.

Sophia will be down in one moment. This is a family party I've invited you to, Tom.

LORD SPRATTE.

Oh, Lord!

CANON SPRATTE.

I don't know why you should say that. I can imagine nothing more charming, nothing more beautiful, and nothing more entertaining.

LORD SPRATTE.

And I always thought you such an imaginative fellow.

WINNIE.

You're not expecting anyone else, papa?

CANON SPRATTE.

I consider it my duty to be as cordial as possible to your future relatives, Winnie; I have asked Mrs. Railing to bring her daughter to tea to-day.

There is a slight pause of embarrassment.

RAILING.

I owe a great deal to my mother, Canon Spratto. My father died when I was a lad, and it's only by

her strength of will and sheer hard work that I've done anything at all.

CANON SPRATTE.

I am anxious to make her acquaintance.

Enter LADY SOPHIA.

LADY SOPHIA.

I've just seen Mrs. Fitzgerald safely off the premises. [*To* LORD SPRATTE.] She wished me to say good-bye to you.

LORD SPRATTE.

Nice woman.

CANON SPRATTE.

A charming woman. A little worldly perhaps, but a charming woman.

PONSONBY *comes in*.

PONSONBY.

Mrs. and Miss Railing.

MRS. RAILING *is short and stout, with a red face and grey hair rather tightly drawn. She wears a shabby crape bonnet a little on one side, a black old-fashioned mantle, cotton gloves; and she carries a gloomy and masculine umbrella.* LOUISE RAILING *wears a pince-nez. She is a determined young woman. She is not only quick to take offence, but she is positively on the look-out for it.*

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Going towards them cordially.*] How d'you do.
How d'you do, Mrs. Railing.

MRS. RAILING.

Nicely, thank you.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*To LOUISE.*] How d'you do.

LOUISE.

Quite well, thank you. Hulloo, Bertram.

RAILING.

Hulloo, Louise.

MRS. RAILING.

You didn't expect to see us this afternoon, Bertie, lay.

LADY SOPHIA.

Won't you sit down. Tea will be in in one minute.

CANON SPRATTE.

Let me introduce you to my sister, Lady Sophia Spratte. . . . Miss Railing, my sister.

LOUISE.

I'm really Miss Louise Railing, you know.

MRS. RAILING.

I 'ave two daughters, me lord. But the older one,

Florrie, ain't quite right in her 'ead, and we 'ad to shut 'er up in a lunatic asylum.

RAILING.

It was the result of an accident.

CANON SPRATTE.

Very sad. Very sad. It's so fortunate you were able to come. Just at this time of year one has so many engagements.

LOUISE.

I thought you people in the West End never did anything.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Smiling.*] The West End has a bad reputation in Peckham Rye.

LOUISE.

Well, I don't know that I can say extra much for the people of Peckham Rye, either.

RAILING.

There's no public spirit among them.

LOUISE.

And yet we do all we can. Our Association tries to stir them up. We give meetings every week, but they won't come to them.

LADY SOPHIA.

I wonder at that.

CANON SPRATTE.

And do you share your brother's talent for oratory?

LOUISE.

Oh, I say a few words now and then.

MRS. RAILING.

You should 'ear 'er talk.

RAILING.

Louise is one of the best speakers in South London.

LOUISE.

Well, I hold with women taking part in everything. I can't stand the sort of woman who sits at home and does nothing but read novels and go to balls. There's an immense field for woman's activities.

RAILING.

Immense.

LOUISE.

And who thinks now that women are inferior to men?

MRS. RAILING.

Ain't she a marvel?

LOUISE.

[*Remonstrating.*] Ma.

MRS. RAILING.

She says I always praise 'er in front of people. But I can't 'elp it. You should see all the prizes and certificates she's got. Oh, I am proud of 'er, I can tell you.

LOUISE.

Ma, don't go on like that always. It makes people think I'm a child.

MRS. RAILING.

Well, Louise, I can't 'clp it. You are a marvel, and there's no denying it. Tell 'em about the gold medal you won.

LORD SPRATTE.

I wish you would. I always respect people with gold medals.

LOUISE.

[*Smiling.*] Go on with you.

MRS. RAILING.

Well, Louie, you are obstinate. She 'as been—ever since she was a child.

PONSONBY *brings in the tea things.* MRS. RAILING *looks round the room, and the CANON sees her eyes rest on the portrait of the first LORD SPRATTE.*

CANON SPRATTE.

That is my father, the late Lord Chancellor of England.

MRS. RAILING.

It's a very 'andsome frame.

LORD SPRATTE.

[*With a guffaw.*] He is plain, isn't he?

MRS. RAILING.

Oh, I didn't mean it like that. I would never take such a liberty.

LORD SPRATTE.

Now, you can't honestly say he was a beauty.

CANON SPRATTE.

Thomas, remember he was my father.

MRS. RAILING.

Now I come to look at 'im, I don't think he's so bad looking after all.

LORD SPRATTE.

In the family we think he's the very image of my brother, Theodore.

MRS. RAILING.

Well, now you mention it, I do see a likeness.

CANON SPRATTE.

My brother is quite a humourist.

He gives MRS. RAILING a cup of tea, and she stirs it meditatively.

MRS. RAILING.

[To LADY SOPHIA.] Nice neighbourhood, this.

LADY SOPHIA.

South Kensington? It's the least unpleasant of all the suburbs.

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear, I cannot allow South Kensington to be called a suburb. It's the very centre of London.

LADY SOPHIA.

It always reminds me of the Hamlet who was funny without being vulgar. South Kensington is Bayswater without being funny.

MRS. RAILING.

Peckham's a nice neighbourhood. You get such a nice class of people there.

LADY SOPHIA.

So I should think.

MRS. RAILING.

We've got such a pretty little 'ouse in the Gladstone Road. Electric light and the telephone, and oh, a lovely bath-room. When we moved in, Louie said to me: Ma, she said, I can't wait till Saturday. I'm going to 'ave a bath to-night. Bertie takes one every morning.

CANON SPRATTE.

Really?

MRS. RAILING.

Yes, and 'e says he can't do without it. If he doesn't have it, 'e's uncomfortable all day.

RAILING.

Mother.

MRS. RAILING.

Things 'ave changed since I was a girl. Why, nobody thought of 'aving all these baths then. Now, only the other day I was talking to Mr. Smithers, the builder. You know who I mean, Bertie, don't you?

RAILING.

Yes, mother.

MRS. RAILING.

And he said to me: Lor', Mrs. Railing, says he, people are getting that fussy, if you built 'em a house without a bath-room they wouldn't so much as look at it.

CANON SPRATTE.

They say that cleanliness is next to godliness.

MRS. RAILING.

There's no denying that, but one 'as to be careful. I've known a rare lot of people catch their death of cold all through 'aving a bath when they wasn't feeling very well.

LORD SPRATTE *has given* LOUISE RAILING *a cup of tea and hands her the sugar.*

LOUISE.

Thanks. No sugar. I don't believe in hydrocarbons.

LORD SPRATTE.

I beg your pardon.

MRS. RAILING.

Don't mind 'er, me lord. It's only one of 'er fads. They're full of them, Bertie and Louie are. Sometimes they just about give me the 'ump, I can tell you.

LOUISE.

Ma, do mind what you're saying.

MRS. RAILING.

Well, you do, Louie—that is Louise. She don't like me to call her Louie. She says it's so common. You know, me lord, my children was christened Bertram and Louise. But we've always called them Bertie and Louie, and I can't get out of the 'abit of it now. But, lor', when your children grow up and get on in the world they want to turn everythink upside down. Now what do you think Bertie wants me to do?

CANON SPRATTE.

I can't imagine.

MRS. RAILING.

Well, would you believe it, he wants me to take the pledge.

RAILING.

Mother.

MRS. RAILING.

Well, look 'ere, me lord, what I say is, I'm an 'ard-workin' woman, and what with the work I do,

I want my little drop of beer now and then. The Captain—my 'usband, that is—'ad a little bit put by, but I 'ad to work to make both ends meet when I was left a widow, I can tell you. And I've given my children a thorough good education.

CANON SPRATTE.

You have reason to be proud of them. I don't suppose my little girl has half the knowledge of Miss Louise.

LOUISE.

That's your fault. Blame nobody but yourself for that. That's because you've not educated her properly. There's no reason that I can see why a girl shouldn't be just as well educated as a man. I always have said it and I always shall.

MRS. RAILING.

Ain't she wonderful? I can sit listening to 'er talking for hours at a time.

CANON SPRATTE.

Except on the subject of teetotalism?

MRS. RAILING.

[*With a hearty laugh.*] You're right there, me lord. What I say is, I'm an 'ard-working woman. . . .

CANON SPRATTE.

And you want your little drop of beer. I know, I know. . . . I was discussing the matter the other day with the lady who does me the honour to clean out my church, and she expressed herself in the same manner. But she rather favoured spirits, I understand.

MRS. RAILING.

Oh, I never take spirits.

CANON SPRATTE.

What never?

MRS. RAILING.

[*Her face beaming.*] Well, 'ardly ever.

CANON SPRATTE.

Capital! Capital!

MRS. RAILING.

Now don't you laugh at me. The fact is, I sometimes 'ave a little drop in my tea.

CANON SPRATTE.

Bless me, why didn't you say so? Winnie, you really ought to have told me. . . . Ring the bell, will you?

MRS. RAILING.

Oh, I didn't mean it like that, me lord.

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear lady. What is it you take. Rum?

MRS. RAILING.

[*Making a face.*] Oh, I can't bear it.

CANON SPRATTE.

Whisky?

MRS. RAILING.

Oh, no, me lord, I wouldn't touch it if I was paid.

CANON SPRATTE.

Gin?

MRS. RAILING.

[*With a broad smile.*] Call it White Satin, me lord.

CANON SPRATTE.

White Satin?

MRS. RAILING.

It's a funny thing now, but rum never 'as agreed with me. An' it's wholesome stuff, you know.

CANON SPRATTE.

I have no doubt.

MRS. RAILING.

The last time I 'ad a little drop—Oh, I was queer. Now, my friend, Mrs. Cooper, can't touch anythink else.

CANON SPRATTE.

Come, come, that's very strange.

MRS. RAILING.

You don't know Mrs. Cooper, do you? Oh, she's such a nice woman. And she's got such a dear little 'ouse in Shepherd Bush.

CANON SPRATTE.

A salubrious neighbourhood, I believe.

MRS. RAILING.

Oh, yes, the tube 'as made a great difference to it. You ought to know Mrs. Cooper. Oh, she's a nice woman and a thorough lady. No one can say a word against 'er, I don't care who it is.

LOUISE.

Ma.

MRS. RAILING.

Well, they do say she takes a little drop too much now and then. But I've never seen 'er with more than she could carry.

CANON SPRATTE.

Really!

MRS. RAILING.

Oh, I don't approve of taking more than you can carry. My motto is strict moderation. But as Mrs. Cooper was saying to me only the other day: Mrs. Railing, she said, with all the trouble I've gone through, I tell you, speaking as one lady to another, I don't know what I should do without a

little drop of rum. And she 'as 'ad a rare lot of trouble. There's no denying it.

CANON SPRATTE.

Poor soul, poor soul!

MRS. RAILING.

Oh, a rare lot of trouble. Now you know it's funny 'ow people differ. Mrs. Cooper said to me: Mrs. Railing, she said, I give you my word of honour I can't touch white satin. It 'as such an effect on me that I don't know whether I'm standing on me 'cad or on me 'eels. So I said to 'er: Mrs. Cooper, I said, you're quite right not to touch it. Now wasn't I right, me lord?

CANON SPRATTE.

Oh, perfectly! I think you gave her the soundest possible advice.

Enter PONSONBY.

CANON SPRATTE.

Ponsonby, have we any—white satin in the house?

MRS. RAILING.

I 'ave 'eard it called satinette.

PONSONBY'S *fish-like eyes travel slowly from the CANON to the stout lady, and he blinks when he catches sight of the rakish cock of her crape bonnet.*

PONSONBY.

White satin, sir? I'll enquire.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Unmoved.*] Or satinette?

PONSONBY *looks at the CANON with an air of perplexity.*

CANON SPRATTE.

Perhaps Ponsonby does not quite understand. I mean, have we any gin in the house?

PONSONBY.

Gin, sir? No, sir.

CANON SPRATTE.

Is there none in the servants' hall?

PONSONBY.

Oh, no, sir.

CANON SPRATTE.

How careless of me. You ought to have reminded me that there was no gin in the house, Sophia. Well, Ponsonby, will you go and get a shilling's worth at the nearest public-house.

MRS. RAILING.

Oh, no, don't send out for it. I could never forgive myself.

CANON SPRATTE.

But I assure you it's no trouble at all. And I should very much like to taste it.

MRS. RAILING.

Well, then, sixpennyworth is ample.

RAILING.

You're much better without it, mother.

CANON SPRATTE.

Come, come, you mustn't grudge your mother a little treat now and then.

MRS. RAILING.

And it's a real treat for me, I can tell you.

CANON SPRATTE.

Sixpennyworth of gin, Ponsonby.

PONSONBY.

Yes, sir.

Exit.

MRS. RAILING.

You don't 'ave to go far in London to find a public 'ouse, do you?

LORD SPRATTE.

The only reason for which I inhabit the Metropolis.

LOUISE.

[*Pouncing on him.*] May I ask if you have ever studied the teetotal question?

LORD SPRATTE.

Not I!

LOUISE.

And you're a hereditary legislator?

LORD SPRATTE.

At the moment.

LOUISE.

I should just like to have a few words with you about the House of Lords. The House of Lords must go.

LORD SPRATTE.

Bless you, I'll part from it without a tear.

LOUISE.

I've been looking for this opportunity for some time. Will you be so good as to tell me what moral right you have to rule over me?

LORD SPRATTE.

[*Deprecatingly*]. My dear lady, if I rule over you it is entirely unawares.

LOUISE.

I'm not concerned with you personally. To you as an individual I am absolutely indifferent.

LORD SPRATTE.

Don't say that. Why should you ruthlessly crush my self-esteem?

LOUISE.

I wish to discuss the matter with you as a member of a privileged class. Now, so far as I can see, you are utterly ignorant of all the great social questions of the day.

LORD SPRATTE.

Utterly.

LOUISE.

Can you give me three reasons in favour of Protection?

LORD SPRATTE.

I confess I can't, but then I happen to be a Free-trader.

LOUISE.

What do you know about the Housing of the Working Classes?

LORD SPRATTE.

Nothing.

LOUISE.

What do you know about Secondary Education?

LORD SPRATTE.

Nothing.

LOUISE.

What do you know about the Taxation of Ground Rents?

LORD SPRATTE.

Nothing.

LOUISE.

And yet you are a member of the Upper Chamber. Just because you're a lord, you have power to legislate over millions of people with ten times more knowledge, more ability, and more education than yourself.

CANON SPRATTE.

Capital. Capital. You rub it in. A good straight talking to is just what he wants.

MRS. RAILING.

When you once get Louie going not wild horses will stop her.

LOUISE.

And how do you spend your time, I should like to know. Do you study the questions of the hour?

LADY SOPHIA AND CANON SPRATTE.

No.

LOUISE.

Do you attempt to fit yourself for the task entrusted to you by the anachronism of a past age?

LADY SOPHIA AND CANON SPRATTE.

No.

LORD SPRATTE.

I wish you'd put that umbrella down, it makes me quite nervous.

LOUISE.

[*Angrily throwing her umbrella on the floor*]. I'll be bound you spend your days in every form of degrading pursuit. At race meetings, billiards, and gambling.

CANON SPRATTE.

Capital. Capital.

LORD SPRATTE.

In point of fact I'm much too poor to gamble, I

always get rheumatism at race-meetings, and I've never played billiards in my life.

CANON SPRATTE.

You *are* a Radical, aren't you?

LOUISE.

I should like you to know that a Radical Government poured filthy muck down my nostrils for three days in Pentonville prison.

PONSONBY *comes in, bearing on a large tray a small liqueur bottle.*

CANON SPRATTE.

Ah, here is the gin.

MRS. RAILING.

Oh, me lord, don't call it gin. It sounds so vulgar. When my poor 'usband was alive I used to say to 'im: Captain, I won't have it called gin in my 'ouse. I always used to call my 'usband the Captain, although he was only first mate. I wish you could 'ave seen 'im. If anyone 'ad said to me: Mrs. Railing, put your 'and on a fine, 'andsome, 'ealthy man, I should 'ave put my 'and on James Samuel Railing. And would you believe it, before he was thirty-five he was dead.

CANON SPRATTE.

How very sad.

MRS. RAILING.

Oh, and he was a dreadful sight before the end. You should have seen his legs.

LOUISE.

Ma.

MRS. RAILING.

Leave me alone, Louie. You're always naggin'.

LOUISE.

No, I'm not, ma.

MRS. RAILING.

Don't contradict, Louie. I won't 'ave it.

CANON SPRATTE.

Won't you have a little more—white satin?

MRS. RAILING.

No, thank you, me lord. I don't think I could stand it. You made the first dose rather strong, and we've got to get 'ome, you know.

LOUISE.

I think we ought to be trotting, ma.

MRS. RAILING.

P'raps we ought. We've got a long way to go.

LOUISE.

We'd better take the train, ma.

MRS. RAILING.

Oh, let's go in a bus, my dear. I like riding in buses, the conductors are so good-looking and such gentlemen. Why, the other day, I got into conversation with the conductor, and would you believe

it, he made me drink a drop of beer with 'im at the end of the journey. Oh, he *was* a nice young man.

RAILING.

You oughtn't to have done that, Mother.

MRS. RAILING.

Well, my dear, so 'e was. And he's none the worse for being a 'bus conductor. They earn very good money, and he told me he was a married man, so I don't see no 'arm in it.

LOUISE.

Come on, ma, or we shall never get off.

MRS. RAILING.

Well, good-bye, me lord, and thank you.

CANON SPRATTE.

So kind of you to come all this way. We've thoroughly enjoyed your visit.

There are general farewells and the RAILINGS go out. For a moment there is complete silence. LADY SOPHIA, LORD SPRATTE and the CANON look at WINNIE. She stares straight in front of her.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Softly*].

For I'm no sailor bold,
And I've never been upon the sea,
And if I fell therein it's a fact I couldn't swim
And quickly at the bottom I should be.

With a sudden stifled sob, WINNIE goes quickly out of the room.

LADY SOPHIA.

You brute, Theodore.

CANON SPRATTE.

Sophia, just write a note to Wroxham and ask him to come to tea to-morrow.

END OF ACT III.

ACT IV.

The SCENE is the same as in the preceding Acts. When the curtain rises LIONEL is discovered sitting in an arm-chair with his feet on the chimney-piece. He is reading a book. The CANON comes in and rings the bell.

CANON SPRATTE.

You seem to be taking things easily, Lionel.

LIONEL.

I'm doing my little best not to get over-tired.

CANON SPRATTE.

What is the book on which you have been improving your mind?

LIONEL.

Oh, it's a detective story. It came from Mudie's the other day.

PONSONBY *enters*.

CANON SPRATTE.

Has Lord Wroxham been to-day, Ponsonby?

PONSONBY.

No, sir.

CANON SPRATTE.

That's strange. I rather thought he was coming to tea. Is Miss Winnie at home?

PONSONBY.

Yes, sir.

CANON SPRATTE.

All right. That'll do.

PONSONBY.

Very good, sir.

Exit.

CANON SPRATTE.

I ran up against the Bishop at the Athenæum after lunch to-day.

LIONEL.

Did you?

CANON SPRATTE.

There's been no confirmation of that announcement that Gray had been appointed to Colchester.

LIONEL.

I wonder if there's been some hitch.

CANON SPRATTE.

I shouldn't be altogether surprised if Gray refused. When a man is still young and vigorous I can imagine no position with greater opportunities for good than the headmastership of a great public school.

LIONEL.

[*Yawning.*] Yes, father.

CANON SPRATTE.

I wish to goodness you wouldn't yawn when I talk to you, Lionel.

LIONEL.

Sorry, Governor.

CANON SPRATTE.

Most people find my conversation entertaining rather than otherwise. You've done nothing all day. . . .

LIONEL.

I took a wedding this afternoon.

CANON SPRATTE.

I haven't been at all satisfied with you of late, Lionel. You seem to show no keenness in your work. You're so phlegmatic. Now that the armies of dissent surround us on every side, we must be up and doing, my dear boy. You take things too easily. You haven't got any push. Now look at me. Surely I give you an example of energy and strenuousness which you would do well to follow.

LIONEL.

I don't know what you've got to complain about in particular.

CANON SPRATTE.

Good heavens, surely you can occupy your time better than by reading trashy novels. If you have nothing better to do why don't you take down a volume of sermons and see whether you can't improve yours a little. I assure you there's room for it.

LIONEL.

Reading sermons isn't a very cheerful occupation, father.

CANON SPRATTE.

They're not written with the object of making you laugh through a horse-collar. And there's something else I wish to speak to you about.

LIONEL.

I suppose it's best to get it all over at once.

CANON SPRATTE.

I want to know for good and all what you propose to do about Gwendolen. I think you've shilly-shallied long enough.

LIONEL.

What *are* you talking about now, father?

CANON SPRATTE.

Good Lord, man, you're not a perfect idiot. We've discussed your marriage *ad nauseam*. I want to know what your intentions are.

LIONEL.

I thought it was only one's prospective mother-in-law who asked one that.

CANON SPRATTE.

It's not fair to the girl to keep her dangling in this fashion. Are you going to marry her or not?

LIONEL.

Well, father, there's no hurry about it?

CANON SPRATTE.

On the contrary there's the greatest possible hurry.

LIONEL.

Why?

CANON SPRATTE.

I have every reason to believe that someone else is thinking of proposing to her.

LIONEL.

Who?

CANON SPRATTE.

I prefer not to say.

LIONEL.

[*Rather sulkily*]. Well, I don't think she cares twopence about me. Lately when I've seen her she's talked of nothing but you.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Smiling*]. There are less diverting topics of conversation.

LIONEL.

One can have too much of a good thing.

CANON SPRATTE.

Well, I warn you candidly. If you don't look sharp someone else will step in and cut you out.

LIONEL.

I shan't break my heart, father.

CANON SPRATTE.

I don't know what the young men of the present day are coming to. They have no enterprise. Gwendolen is one of the most charming girls I have ever met. She's extremely pretty, her fortune is considerable, and she has a thoroughly nice nature. Anyhow, I've done my duty, and you mustn't be surprised whatever happens.

LIONEL.

You're not thinking of marrying her yourself, governor?

CANON SPRATTE.

[*With some asperity*]. And would you have any thing to say against my doing so?

LIONEL.

Well, she's a good deal younger than you.

CANON SPRATTE.

Let me tell you, my boy, that a man of fifty is in the very flower of his age. I flatter myself there are few men of your years who have half the vigour and energy that I have.

LIONEL.

[*Looking at his watch*]. Well, I think I'll go and dress for dinner.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Sarcastically, still rather ruffled*]. Do. It generally takes you an hour and a half.

Exit LIONEL. CANON SPRATTE *touches the bell. He walks to the window and looks out. PONSONBY comes in.*

CANON SPRATTE.

Oh, Ponsonby, Lady Sophia is at home to no one but Lord Wroxham.

PONSONBY.

Very good, sir.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*As PONSONBY is leaving the room.*] Oh, and—when his lordship has been here a minute or two, I wish you to call me away.

PONSONBY.

Very good, sir.

As PONSONBY leaves the room he winks solemnly at the portrait of the first Earl Spratte. Enter WINNIE.

CANON SPRATTE.

Well, darling, what have you been doing this afternoon?

WINNIE.

I haven't been doing anything. I've been resting.

CANON SPRATTE.

Dear me, did you have a very strenuous morning?

WINNIE.

No, I didn't do anything this morning.

CANON SPRATTE.

How is Mr. Railing to-day?

WINNIE.

I've not seen him. He was too busy. But he's coming round for five minutes before dinner on his way to some meeting he's going to speak at.

PONSONBY *comes in and announces WROXHAM,
who enters immediately afterwards.*

PONSONBY.

Lord Wroxham.

CANON SPRATTE.

Ah, my dear boy, I'm so pleased to see you.

WROXHAM.

[*Giving his hand to WINNIE.*] You must think me a dreadful bore. I'm always coming.

CANON SPRATTE.

Nonsense. We're always delighted to see you. I want you to look upon the Vicarage as your second home.

WROXHAM.

Lady Sophia very kindly asked me to tea, but I couldn't get away. I thought you wouldn't mind if I looked in for half a minute on my way home. My mother wanted to know if Winnie would come to the opera with us to-morrow.

CANON SPRATTE.

I'm sure she'll be delighted.

WINNIE.

It's very kind of you to think of me.

Enter PONSONBY.

PONSONBY.

There's a party wishes to see you, sir, if it wouldn't be troubling you.

CANON SPRATTE.

Tut, tut, tut. I can't see anybody at this hour. I'm just going to dress for dinner.

PONSONBY.

The party said she'd look upon it as a great favour if you could spare her five minutes.

CANON SPRATTE.

Oh, well, I suppose I shall have to go down.
[*To* WROXHAM.] I must ask you to excuse me for a few minutes.

WROXHAM.

Oh, pray don't mind me.

CANON SPRATTE.

It's really too tiresome.

He goes out, followed by PONSONBY.

WROXHAM.

What a piece of luck.

WINNIE.

Why?

WROXHAM.

I so seldom get a chance of speaking to you.

[WINNIE *does not reply, but, in a certain embarrassment, pulls to pieces a marguerite.*]

WROXHAM.

What does it come to?

WINNIE.

[*With a smile, holding out the flower with one petal still remaining on it.*] He loves me not.

WROXHAM.

It's not true. He loves you passionately. He always will.

WINNIE.

Oh, Harry, I'm so unhappy—so dreadfully unhappy.

WROXHAM.

Oh, my dearest. . . . Did you mean it really when you told me never to hope?

WINNIE.

I said that hardly a week ago, didn't I? Oh, I utterly despise myself.

WROXHAM.

But why? Why?

WINNIE.

I wonder if you really care for me.

WROXHAM.

You're all I care for in the world. I love you.
I love you. I love you.

WINNIE.

I think I like to hear you say that.

WROXHAM.

Winnie!

WINNIE.

I'm so miserable. I want someone so badly to
care for me.

WROXHAM.

Why don't you tell me what's the matter? I may
be able to do something for you.

WINNIE.

It is kind of you to be nice to me. You're so
much nicer than I ever thought you.

WROXHAM.

Winnie, won't you say you love me?

WINNIE.

Do you remember when I first saw you? You
came here with Lionel, from Eton.

WROXHAM.

It didn't take us long to become friends.

WINNIE.

You used to get so angry when I beat you at
tennis.

WROXHAM.

Oh, you never did—except when I let you. D'you remember how I used to punt you up and down the river in the holidays?

WINNIE.

How frightened I was when you fell in.

WROXHAM.

You fibber! You shrieked and roared with laughter.

WINNIE.

[*With a sigh.*] I'm so tired. I've had such an exhausting day.

She sits down on a sofa and he sits down beside her.

WROXHAM.

You used to make me awfully jealous by talking to other little boys.

WINNIE.

Oh, never! It was always you. You were so dreadfully flirtatious. [*He takes her hand and she does not resist.*] I wonder when you first began to like me?

WROXHAM.

I've never liked you. I've loved you always.

WINNIE.

[*Smiling.*] Even when I wore a pig-tail and square-toed boots?

WROXHAM.

Always. And I always shall. Oh, Winnie, you didn't mean it when you said you couldn't love me?

WINNIE.

I don't quite remember. I don't think I could have.

WROXHAM.

Winnie. You're going to marry me? Oh, Winnie!

WINNIE.

I'll do anything to make you happy.

Blushing, she turns her lips to him, and he kisses her passionately. The CANON'S voice is heard outside.

CANON SPRATTE.

La donna é mobile. Tra-la-la-la-la-la. [He comes in and gives a slight start when he sees the young couple sitting together on the sofa]. Hulloo, I thought you must have gone. I was detained longer than I expected.

WROXHAM.

[To WINNIE.] May I tell him?

WINNIE.

[Smiling.] Yes.

WROXHAM.

Canon Spratte, I want to tell you that Winnie has just promised to be my wife.

CANON SPRATTE.

What! Capital! Capital! My dear fellow, I'm delighted to hear it. My dear child!

He opens his arms and WINNIE hides her face in his bosom. He kisses her affectionately, then shakes hands with WROXHAM.

CANON SPRATTE.

I knew she was devoted to you, my boy. Trust me for knowing a woman's character.

WINNIE.

[*With a laugh, stretching out her hand to WROXHAM.*] Father's wonderful.

WROXHAM.

You've made me very happy.

CANON SPRATTE.

Now, my dear boy, you must go and tell Sophia. You'll find her in her boudoir.

WROXHAM.

I?

CANON SPRATTE.

You know she's rather touchy. I think you ought to tell her yourself.

WROXHAM.

And Winnie?

CANON SPRATTE.

Winnie and I will follow you in a minute.

WROXHAM.

I go like a lamb to the slaughter.

He goes, with a smile to WINNIE ; she kisses her fingers to him as he disappears through the inner room. CANON SPRATTE looks at his daughter with an expression of great amusement. She turns away, and, still standing, begins to turn over the pages of a book.

CANON SPRATTE.

Would it be indiscreet, dear Winnie, to inquire when you broke off your engagement with Mr. Railing?

WINNIE.

[*Looking up.*] I haven't broken it off.

CANON SPRATTE.

In tones of mild interrogation.] And do you intend to marry them both?

WINNIE.

Oh, daddy, you must help me. I'm simply distracted.

CANON SPRATTE.

Do I understand that the fact that Mrs. Railing drops her aitches and drinks gin, while her daughter is bumptious and vulgar, has had any effect upon your attachment to Mr. Bertram Railing?

WINNIE.

D'you think I'm an awful snob, father?

CANON SPRATTE.

Of course you're a snob, my dear, but I would not have you anything else. I do not share the vulgar contempt for the most valuable quality of the Anglo-Saxon race. Snobbishness has made us not only a great nation, but a Christian nation, for snobbishness is no more than a desire to improve our position, first in this world and then in the next. I cannot help thinking that if I had possessed a particle of it myself I should not now be languishing in obscurity.

WINNIE.

[*Going on with her own reflections.*] I've made such a fool of myself. He took me unawares and I thought for a moment that I could live his life. But I'm frightened of him.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Gravely.*] One thing I insist upon knowing, Winnie. Which do you honestly prefer?

WINNIE *hesitates for a moment, then she gives a little stifled sob.*

WINNIE.

That's just it. I love them both.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Astounded.*] What! !

WINNIE.

When I'm with one I think he's so much nicer than the other.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Much annoyed.*] Really, Winnie, you can't shilly-shally in this way.

WINNIE.

When I see Bertram I'm simply carried away. I'm filled with high and noble thoughts. But I can't live up to his ideal. He doesn't love the woman I am, he loves the woman I may become. You see, Bertram's a hero.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Irritably.*] Fiddlededee! He's a journalist.

WINNIE.

But Harry doesn't want me any different from what I am. He loves me for myself. He doesn't think I have any faults. . . .

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Interrupting.*] Really, Winnie, I don't think it's quite nice for a girl of your age to analyse her feelings in this way. I hate people who can't make up their minds.

WINNIE.

Oh, but I know quite well which I want to marry.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Relenting.*] Oh, well, I suppose that is the chief thing.

WINNIE.

You will get me out of the scrape, father?

CANON SPRATTE.

You see, your poor old father is still some use after all. What do you wish me to do, my child?

WINNIE.

When Bertram comes, I want you to tell him it's all a mistake and I can't marry him.

CANON SPRATTE.

He won't take it from me.

WINNIE.

I daren't see him again. I should be so ashamed.

PONSONBY *comes in*.

PONSONBY.

Mr. Railing, sir. I said her ladyship was not at home . . .

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Interrupting PONSONBY's explanations.*] Oh, yes, ask him to come up.

PONSONBY.

Very good, sir.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*To WINNIE, quickly.*] Wait in the next room.

WINNIE *slips out of the room just before*

RAILING *enters it*.

PONSONBY.

Mr. Railing.

The CANON goes up to him with every appearance of cordiality. RAILING has in his hands a bunch of roses. He puts them down.

CANON SPRATTE.

How d'you do? How good of you to look in so late, dear Railing.

RAILING.

Winnie told me she'd be at home this afternoon.

CANON SPRATTE.

Of course, I didn't flatter myself you'd come to see me, but it so happens that I've been wanting to have a little chat with you.

RAILING.

I'm at your service.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Gaily.*] It's a very serious step that you young folks are taking.

RAILING.

Then we're wise to take it with a light heart.

CANON SPRATTE.

Ha, ha—capital. Now, I should have thought you were both very young to be married.

RAILING.

I am twenty-five, sir, and Winnie is twenty-one.

CANON SPRATTE.

You neither of you look it.

RAILING.

Possibly.

CANON SPRATTE.

I need not tell you that I have the highest esteem for you personally, and the sincerest admiration for your talents. But we live in an age when talent is not always rewarded according to its merits, and I am curious to know upon what you propose to live.

RAILING.

I make about two hundred and fifty a year and Winnie has about a hundred and fifty from her mother.

CANON SPRATTE.

You're very well informed.

RAILING.

Winnie told me.

CANON SPRATTE.

Obviously. I didn't for a moment suppose that you had examined the will at Somerset House. And do you imagine that Winnie will be content to live on four hundred a year?

RAILING.

It's three times as much as my mother ever had.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Very politely.*] What has that got to do with it?

RAILING.

Do you think your daughter cares two straws for the gewgaws and the tawdry trappings of society?

CANON SPRATTE.

I think my daughter is human, Mr. Railing, and although it may surprise you I will confess that I think a motor essential to her happiness.

RAILING.

I know Winnie and I love her. You think she's a doll and a fool. She was. I've made her into a woman of flesh and blood. She's a real woman now and she loathes all the sham and the shallowness of society.

CANON SPRATTE.

She told you that, did she? Upon my word, we Sprattes *have* a sense of humour.

RAILING.

Thank God, she knows now how narrow this little circle is of idle selfish people. She wants to work. She wants to labour with her fellow men, shoulder to shoulder, fighting the good fight.

CANON SPRATTE.

And do you think, my dear young man, that it would ever have occurred to Winnie that the world was hollow and foolish, if *you* had a wart on the tip of your nose, or a squint in your eye?

RAILING.

You believe that all people are bad.

CANON SPRATTE.

On the contrary, I'm so charitable as to think them merely foolish.

RAILING.

[*Beginning to lose his temper.*] What are you driving at? Why don't you say it out like a man instead of beating about the bush?

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear Railing, I must beg you to observe the conventions of polite society. It is clearly my duty to inquire into the circumstances of any young man who proposes to marry my daughter.

RAILING.

I distrusted you when I heard you agreed to our engagement. I knew you despised me. I knew that all your flattery was humbug.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Blandly.*] I am sure that when you are calmer you will regret some of the expressions that you have seen fit to use. But I will tell you at once that I bear you absolutely no ill-will on their account.

RAILING.

I'm much obliged to you, but I'm not aware that I've used any expression which I'm in the least likely to regret.

CANON SPRATTE.

Then if I may say so, as a man much older than

yourself and as a clergyman, you show both your want of Christian charity and your ignorance of social amenities.

RAILING.

D'you want me to understand that you withdraw the consent which you gave two days ago?

CANON SPRATTE.

It has come to my knowledge that your elder sister is in a lunatic asylum. I need not tell you that I regret the misfortune, but my views on the subject are very decided.

RAILING.

[*Interrupting.*] That's absurd. Florrie had an accident when she was a child. She fell downstairs, and since then she's been . . .

CANON SPRATTE.

Not quite right in her head, as your mother expressed it, Mr. Railing. I should like you to observe, however, that every child falls downstairs, and the entire human race is not so imbecile as to need the restraint of a lunatic asylum.

RAILING.

The fact remains that Winnie loves me.

CANON SPRATTE.

Are you quite sure of that?

RAILING.

As sure as I am of my own name and my own life.

CANON SPRATTE.

Well, it is my painful duty to inform you that you are mistaken. Winnie recognises that she misjudged the strength of her affection.

RAILING.

Rot.

CANON SPRATTE.

She has asked me to tell you that she finds she does not care for you enough to marry you. She regrets the unhappiness that she has caused and begs you to release her.

RAILING.

It's not true.

CANON SPRATTE.

On my honour as a gentleman I have told you the exact truth.

RAILING.

Then let her tell me so herself.

CANON SPRATTE.

I think it would be better for both of you if you did not meet again.

RAILING.

I must see her. I won't go till I see her. I tell you I won't go.

The CANON hesitates for a moment, then shrugs his shoulders. He goes to the inner-room, opens the door and calls.

CANON SPRATTE.

Winne! [*There is a moment's pause, and then WINNIE enters.*] I wished to spare you both a painful scene, but Mr. Railing insists on seeing you.

RAILING.

It's not true, Winnie?

WINNIE.

I'm very sorry.

RAILING.

[*To CANON SPRATTE.*] Please leave us alone. . .
[*As he sees that the CANON is about to refuse.*] Surely you can't grudge me that.

CANON SPRATTE.

I'll wait in the next room.

He goes into the inner drawing-room.

RAILING catches sight of the roses he brought with him and hands them to

WINNIE.

RAILING.

I brought you some flowers, Winnie.

WINNIE.

It's very kind of you.

He looks at her for a moment. She keeps her eyes averted.

RAILING.

The other day you said you loved me better than

anyone in the whole world. What have they done to turn you against me?

WINNIE.

No one has done anything.

RAILING.

And yet, suddenly, with nothing to explain it, you send your father to say you've made a mistake.

WINNIE.

I'm awfully sorry for all the pain I've caused you.

RAILING.

Are you afraid because I'm poor and nobody in particular? But you knew that before . . . How can you sacrifice all that we planned so joyfully, the life of labour shoulder to shoulder and the fine struggle for our fellows.

WINNIE.

[*Violently.*] I should hate it.

RAILING.

Winnie!

WINNIE.

Oh, Bertram, try to understand. I want you to see that we made a dreadful mistake. Thank heaven we discovered it before it was too late. I'm not made for the life you want me to lead. I should be utterly out of it.

RAILING.

But why? Why?

WINNIE.

It was only pose when I enthused about labour and temperance. I wanted you to think me clever and original. I don't like the poor. I don't want to have anything to do with them. I daresay poverty and crime are very dreadful, but I want to shut my eyes and forget them. I hate grime and dirt. I think the slums are horrible. Can't you see how awful it would be if we married? I should only hamper you, and we'd both be utterly wretched.

RAILING.

Your father said a motor was essential to your happiness. You can't mind whether you go on foot or in a gaudy carriage. Life is so full and there's so much work to do. What can it matter so long as we do our duty?

WINNIE.

But I don't want to do my duty. I want to be happy.

RAILING.

Have you no care for humanity?

WINNIE.

Humanity? I'm awfully sorry, but I think I cared less for humanity after you showed me how your cuffs took off.

RAILING.

Oh! How can you be so flippant! You're all the same, all of you, trivial, petty, frivolous.

WINNIE.

It's not just one act of heroism that it needs. It's strength to be heroic day after day in a dull, sordid fashion. And there can never be any escape from it. One has to make up one's mind that it'll last for ever. I see myself living in a shabby house in a horrid pokey street, and having socialists to high tea. And I could almost scream.

RAILING.

It's all so small.

WINNIE.

Oh, it's all very fine for you to talk. You've been brought up without luxury and of course you don't miss it. You think it's very easy for me to do housework, and mend linen as your mother does, but d'you think it's any easier than it would be for you who've worked with your brains to mend roads from morning till night?

Before he can answer WROXHAM'S voice is heard in the inner room, and immediately afterwards he comes in impetuously, followed by the CANON.

WROXHAM.

Ah, there you are, Canon. Where's Winnie. . . . I've done the deed, Winnie. I told her and we fell upon one another's necks. [*Seeing RAILING.*] Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were alone. Why, it's Mr. Railing. How d'you do?

RAILING.

[*Shaking hands.*] How d'you do?

CANON SPRATTE.

I had no idea that you knew one another.

WROXHAM.

Oh, yes. I was chairman at a meeting Mr. Railing spoke at the other day. By the way, I've been reading your book.

CANON SPRATTE.

Yes, it's a capital book. I've always thought so, my dear Railing. I'm proud to say I was among the first to discern its striking merit.

WROXHAM.

[*To WINNIE.*] I say, Lady Sophia wants to take you to her bosom. She's awfully bucked.

RAILING *gives a slight start and looks sharply at WROXHAM.*

CANON SPRATTE.

I remember you told us how deeply it had impressed the Duchess of St. Ermyn's. I'm sure you'll be glad to hear that the Princess of Wartburg-Hochstein found it most readable.

RAILING *takes no notice, but watches WINNIE and WROXHAM suspiciously. WROXHAM has gone up to WINNIE and is smiling at her happily.*

WROXHAM.

Lady Sophia has asked me to dine. I must bolt off and dress.

CANON SPRATTE.

Oh, yes, yes! We shall be delighted to have you. [*Looking at his watch.*] It must be getting late. I don't want to hurry you, but our cook is a great stickler for punctuality. What do you make the time, Mr. Railing?

RAILING

Five minutes to eight.

CANON SPRATTE.

Dear me, I had no idea it was so late.

WROXHAM.

Oh, it'll only take me ten minutes to get my things on. . . . What are you going to wear to-night, Winnie? I want to bring you some roses.

WINNIE.

Yes, do—red ones. I have no flowers to wear.

RAILING.

Have you already forgotten mine?

WINNIE.

Oh!

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Coming to the rescue.*] No, no. Of course she hasn't. But yours are so beautiful, it would be a pity to wear them. They die so quickly. We must have them put in water, darling.

WROXHAM.

[*Smiling at the CANON's deftness.*] You must

come in to Lady Sophia for just one moment. You know what people are on these occasions.

CANON SPRATTE.

Yes, go along, both of you. And I shall finish what I had to say to Mr. Railing. [*To RAILING.*] So sorry to delay you, my dear friend. You must be in a hurry to get off.

RAILING.

My business is with Winnie. Lord Wroxham won't mind waiting a minute or two.

CANON SPRATTE.

Perhaps you'll continue your conversation some other time, Mr. Railing. I'm afraid it's getting very late.

RAILING.

Do you wish me to explain the circumstances to Lord Wroxham?

CANON SPRATTE.

Oh, I think that's quite unnecessary. Come, come, Mr. Railing, don't be childish. In this world we must all bow to the inevitable.

WROXHAM.

You're all very mysterious.

WINNIE.

[*Rather frightened.*] Let's go in to the others. I have nothing more to say to Mr. Railing.

RAILING.

But I have a great deal more to say to you. [To LORD WROXHAM.] Please leave us alone. I'm sorry to appear rude.

CANON SPRATTE.

I think you had better leave us, Wroxham. I will explain all this nonsense to you later.

RAILING.

[*With a flash of anger.*] You call it nonsense, do you?

WROXHAM.

[*Puzzled.*] Very well. I'll go home and dress. My mother will be so pleased.

He goes out.

CANON SPRATTE.

Upon my word, Mr. Railing, your behaviour is very extraordinary. I think after all I've done for you I have the right to expect a little gratitude.

RAILING, *in perplexity, looks after* LORD WROXHAM.

RAILING.

What did he mean by all those things he said? Why should he bring you flowers . . . Oh!

The truth dawns on him and he stalks towards the door as if he were going to follow WROXHAM. CANON SPRATTE *gets in his way.*

CANON SPRATTE.

Where are you going? I think you forget yourself, Mr. Railing.

RAILING.

[*Turning on* WINNIE.] Are you engaged to Lord Wroxham, too?

CANON SPRATTE.

I consider that a very impertinent question.

RAILING.

For heaven's sake let me alone. [*To* WINNIE.] Tell me. I insist on your answering.

CANON SPRATTE.

Upon my word this is too much. I really wonder why I don't kick you downstairs.

RAILING.

Perhaps because I'm a working-man and horny-handed.

CANON SPRATTE.

It evidently hasn't occurred to you that the manners of Peckham Rye are not altogether suited to South Kensington.

RAILING.

[*To* WINNIE.] Are you engaged to that man?

WINNIE.

[*After a moment's hesitation.*] I need make no secret of it.

RAILING.

That's why you threw me over. You got an offer that was too good to refuse.

CANON SPRATTE.

Really, Mr. Railing, I cannot allow you to insult my daughter. You will have the goodness to go, or I shall have to call the servants.

RAILING.

What do you think Lord Wroxham would say if I told him that at the very moment your daughter accepted him she was engaged to me?

CANON SPRATTE.

[*With a thin smile.*] I should consider myself justified under the circumstances in denying the accuracy of your statement.

RAILING *looks at him for a moment with all the scorn he can command.*

RAILING.

Oh, what an escape I've had! I might have degraded myself so far as to marry a lady.

He flounces out of the room and slams the door behind him.

CANON SPRATTE.

How stagey. How abominably stagey.

WINNIE.

How vulgar.

CANON SPRATTE.

I hope this will be a warning and a lesson to you, my child. You see what comes of disobeying your parents and setting yourself irreligiously against their better judgment. Never forget that you almost made it necessary for your father to tell a lie.

WINNIE.

[*Nervous and ill at ease.*] Oughtn't I to make a clean breast of it, father?

CANON SPRATTE.

To Wroxham? I forbid you to do anything of the sort. And I hope you have been sufficiently punished for your wilful disobedience to obey me now. Wroxham is very susceptible and it's your duty to give him no anxiety. And whatever you do, don't begin your married life by confessing everything to your husband. One can never tell the whole truth and it leads to endless deception.

WINNIE.

But suppose he finds out?

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Infinitely relieved.*] Oh, is that all? I thought it was the voice of conscience, and it's only the fear of detection. Leave it to me. I'll tell him all that's necessary for him to know. And now, darling, we must both go and dress.

WINNIE.

All right, father.

She gives him a kiss and runs off. He is just going to follow when PONSONBY enters to announce GWENDOLEN DURANT. She comes in. She is in evening dress.

PONSONBY.

Miss Durant.

Exit.

GWENDOLEN.

[*With girlish impulsiveness.*] Oh, don't be angry with me. I know I'm much too early.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Gallantly.*] You're never too early.

GWENDOLEN.

I thought dinner was at eight and when Ponsonby told me it was at a quarter past the car had gone, so I couldn't go away again.

CANON SPRATTE.

I look upon it as a merciful dispensation of providence. I shall have five minutes of your society without anyone to interfere.

GWENDOLEN.

Oh, but you mustn't let me bother you. I've sent up to ask Winnie if I can go and sit with her while she's dressing.

CANON SPRATTE.

I refuse to be dismissed so cavalierly. I insist first of all on telling you how perfectly ravishing you look to-night.

GWENDOLEN.

I always put on my best frock when I come here.

CANON SPRATTE.

I wish I could think you did it because of a middle-aged clerical gentleman with rapidly silvering hair.

GWENDOLEN.

I like you to think me pretty.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Smiling.*] Do you?

GWENDOLEN.

When I'm looking my best you always tell me so, and of course I try to look my best.

CANON SPRATTE.

You make me regret more than ever that I'm not twenty-five.

GWENDOLEN.

Why?

CANON SPRATTE.

Because if I were I should promptly ask you to marry me.

GWENDOLEN.

If you were I should probably refuse you.

CANON SPRATTE.

I wonder what you mean by that?

GWENDOLEN.

It's almost distressingly clear.

CANON SPRATTE.

Gwendolen !

GWENDOLEN.

I wonder if Winnie would mind my going up to her room.

CANON SPRATTE.

I suppose it never struck you that I took more than common pleasure in your conversation.

GWENDOLEN.

I only know that I've never met anyone who's so delightful to talk to as you.

CANON SPRATTE.

My heart has remained as young as ever, but I'm fifty, Gwendolen. Fifty !

GWENDOLEN.

I never asked myself what your age was. I never felt that you were any older than I.

CANON SPRATTE.

Gwendolen, by your side I feel as young as the summer morning. What can the years matter when I have the spirit of a boy? I admire you and I love you. Don't think me too absurd.

GWENDOLEN.

I don't think you at all absurd.

CANON SPRATTE.

Gwendolen, will you be my wife ?

GWENDOLEN.

[*Smiling.*] What about Lionel?

CANON SPRATTE.

Oh, Lionel can go to the dickens.

*She stretches out her hands and he takes them
and kisses them.*

GWENDOLEN.

Now you really must go and dress and I'll go and talk to Winnie.

CANON SPRATTE.

You've made me the happiest of men.

*He opens the door for her and she goes out.
He takes out his watch and looks at it.*

CANON SPRATTE.

I say, I shall have to look sharp.

PONSONBY *shows in* LORD SPRATTE *and
immediately retires.*

PONSONBY.

Lord Spratte.

LORD SPRATTE.

Hulloa, Theodore, you're not dressed yet.

CANON SPRATTE.

Have you heard the news, Tom?

LORD SPRATTE.

I passed Wroxham as I was strolling along here

and he stopped his car and told me. He seems as pleased as Punch.

LADY SOPHIA *comes in, magnificent in her evening gown.*

LADY SOPHIA.

Aren't you going to dress, Theodore? You'll be dreadfully late.

CANON SPRATTE.

I've had a busy afternoon.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*To LORD SPRATTE.*] What do you think of Winnie's new engagement?

LORD SPRATTE.

I think it's cost me a poney.

LADY SOPHIA.

How is that?

LORD SPRATTE.

I bet Mrs. Fitzgerald a poney that Theodore wouldn't work it.

CANON SPRATTE.

She deserves to win. She believes in me. She knows that when I make up my mind to do a thing I do it.

LORD SPRATTE.

Nonsense. She merely thinks you a more unscrupulous ruffian than I do.

CANON SPRATTE.

Ha, ha! You may have your little joke, Tom. The fact remains that Mrs. Fitzgerald is one of the most charming women I know. If it weren't for that ridiculous will of her husband's I should insist on your marrying her. She's just the sort of wife you want.

LORD SPRATTE.

What ridiculous will?

CANON SPRATTE.

Well, it apparently contains a proviso, most unjust to any young woman, whereby she loses every penny of her income on her remarriage.

LADY SOPHIA.

[*Pouncing on him.*] Have you been asking Mrs. Fitzgerald to marry you, Theodore?

CANON SPRATTE.

My dear, what on earth makes you ask that?

LADY SOPHIA.

She thinks quite rightly that a widow with five thousand a year is a lunatic if she marries again. She confided to me a long time ago that when her admirers grew inconveniently attentive she gave them to understand that she only retained her income while she was a widow. And the effect on their passion was nothing short of miraculous.

CANON SPRATTE.

D'you mean to say it's not true?

LADY SOPHIA.

Not a word of it. I've seen the will myself.

The CANON, flabbergasted, is at a loss for words.

LORD SPRATTE.

[*With a shout.*] Theodore, you've been done in the eye. Oh, Theodore, Theodore. A crafty old bird like you.

He begins to laugh. He rolls from side to side. He rocks with laughter. LADY SOPHIA catches the infection and goes into peal upon peal of merriment. CANON SPRATTE is furious.

CANON SPRATTE.

Be quiet. Be quiet.

They stop, gasping, and the CANON seizes the opportunity to get in an explanation.

CANON SPRATTE.

Mrs. Fitzgerald is a most estimable person, and I should be the last to say anything against her. But I can't think for a moment that she has the stability of character or the sense of decorum which are absolutely essential to a clergyman's wife.

LORD SPRATTE can no longer restrain himself and bursts out again into long guffaws. LIONEL comes in dressed for dinner.

LIONEL.

Hulloa, what's the matter ?

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Furiously.*] Can't you see? Your uncle has made a joke and he's quite overcome by it.

LIONEL.

Hulloa, you're not dressed yet, governor.

CANON SPRATTE.

Good heavens, Lionel, I know I'm not dressed. D'you think I'm a perfect imbecile?

PONSONBY *comes in, and the CANON does not immediately see that he has a telegram on a small salver.*

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Impatiently.*] Yes, what is it? Oh, a telegram.

He opens it and starts back with a cry, then sinks into a chair with a gasp, putting his hand to his head.

LIONEL.

Father, what's the matter?

CANON SPRATTE.

Get me a glass of sherry. I'm quite upset.

LIONEL.

[*To the butler.*] Hurry up, Ponsonby.

PONSONBY *goes out.*

LORD SPRATTE.

What's the matter, Theodore?

CANON SPRATTE.

[*Pulling himself together.*] Sophia. Sophia, you will be gratified to learn that the Government has offered me the vacant bishopric of Colchester.

LORD SPRATTE.

Oh, I am glad, Theodore.

LADY SOPHIA.

So Dr. Gray refused it after all.

CANON SPRATTE.

[*With dignity.*] He never had it offered him. I am not the man, Sophia, to come as a second thought. And that being so I shall not delay, I shall not consider the matter, but accept, as it is offered me, frankly and by telegram.

LORD SPRATTE.

I congratulate you.

PONSONBY *comes in during the last two speeches and pours out a glass of sherry for the CANON.*

CANON SPRATTE.

[*As he takes it.*] Ponsonby, I'm a bishop.

PONSONBY.

I'm very glad to hear it, my lord.

CANON SPRATTE *smiles with gratification as he hears the title.*

CANON SPRATTE.

Ponsonby.

PONSONBY.

Yes, my lord.

CANON SPRATTE.

Nothing. That'll do, Ponsonby, you can go.

PONSONBY.

Very good, my lord.

CANON SPRATTE.

Now, I really can go and dress for dinner. . . .
Oh, Lionel, just take down a short notice for me,
will you?

LADY SOPHIA.

Theodore, you know how sensitive our cook is.
She always gets drunk if we don't sit down
punctually.

CANON SPRATTE.

I cannot say I think it nice of you to dwell in
this manner on your carnal appetites, Sophia. I
should have thought at this juncture your mind
would be attuned to higher things.

LADY SOPHIA.

Fiddlesticks, Theodore.

CANON SPRATTE.

Sophia, I have long felt that you do not treat me
with proper respect. I cannot permit you any
longer to act towards me with this mixture of

indecent frivolity and vulgar cynicism. My position is radically altered. Are you ready, Lionel?

LIONEL.

Yes, father.

CANON SPRATTE.

We are authorised to announce that a marriage has been arranged between Lord Wroxham of Castle Tanker, and Winifred, only daughter of the Honourable—spell that in full, Lionel—and Reverend Canon Theodore Spratte, bishop elect of Colchester; better known as the . . .

LIONEL.

Better known as the—yes?

CANON SPRATTE.

You're very dull, Lionel. Better known as the popular and brilliant Vicar of St. Gregory's, South Kensington. Now put it in an envelope and address it to the Editor of the *Morning Post*.

GWENDOLEN enters.

GWENDOLEN.

Winnie wants me to tell you that she'll be ready in two minutes.

CANON SPRATTE.

You were making merry over me just now, Thomas. Allow me to inform you that I have asked Miss Gwendolen Durant to marry me, and she has done me the great honour to accept.

THE END.

**PRESIDENT'S
SECRETARIAT
LIBRARY**

